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Article

Recontextualising Gandhian Views on Women and Partnership through Paulo Coelho's *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*

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ABSTRACT

The article juxtaposes the Gandhian vision of the role of women and partnership in the social sphere with that of Paulo Coelho to argue that a comparative analysis of the two requires a re-reading and a re-interpretation of Gandhian philosophy. How Gandhi influenced Coelho and how Coelho internalised the Gandhian image of women in the novel under review, would show the need to contextualise, decontextualise and recontexualise Gandhian ideal and how it still holds relevance in the modern world.

"To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women... If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, then the future is with women." (Gandhi 1930)

Gandhi's Views on Women

Mahatma Gandhi may not have been an un-faulted god, but he was, most definitely, a visionary human being whose thoughts and actions stood far ahead of his times. Gandhi, the man who taught the strength of non-violence to the world, envisaged a significant role for the woman in the Indian scenario empowering her within the microcosm of the family and the macrocosm of the society. He believed that man and woman are a "peerless pair… supplementary to each other… each helps the other so that without the one, the existence of the other could not be conceived". In an age where women were objectified, vilified and restricted by social and cultural dogmas, Gandhi aspired to build a society where man and woman would be equally empowered. A holistic development of the women in the country, Gandhi believed, could be the pioneer in tracing the way towards the progress of the country. A moral, spiritual, physical and economic growth of the Indian woman would help the country blossom into the India of Gandhi's dream. Comprehending the existing social setting, Gandhi attempted to develop a contemporary concept of womanhood by validating,

negating and reconstructing the prevailing ideas and perceptions of femininity. According to Gandhi, improving the condition of women in the country was of primary importance and this, he realised, could be executed by enhancing the degree of agency that a woman holds. Moreover, an upgradation of the moral condition of a woman's life, instilling within her a sense of dignity and self-respect and curbing the vile practices of men - their domination and abuse of power over their wives, were also necessary.

However, Gandhi's views on women have often been criticised for being patriarchal in outlook, patronizing in attitude and essentialist in its understanding of gender roles. But in order to comprehend and make the Gandhian resolutions and principles relevant to the present times, it is important to contextualize them, to trace the social roots of his perceptions and to understand the social patterns and ideologies of his times. Gandhi criticised the feminine roles prescribed by the society and the religious texts which cloistered women's progress. Despite functioning within the contemporary patriarchal superstructure, Gandhi is often considered the first statesman of India who modelled a social framework where both the sexes were fundamentally equal. Ancient Indian texts have often betrayed prominent misogynistic and essentialist overtures, conceptualising a woman as a seductress or an embodiment of temptation with the sole purpose of distracting men from their pursuits. Gandhi's view of women, however, saw them as absolute equals, as partners of men in the process of nation building. He was willing to respect the traditions of the land and ignite the nationalistic fervour but not at the cost of one's individual dignity and moral integrity, irrespective of the gender. According to Gandhi, "it is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide." (Gandhi, 1925)

Of the many reasons why Gandhi became a phenomenon in the Indian scenario is the fact that he stood against the tide of time restricting his impulse and initiating a new strain of sensibility where women were not perceived as helpless lives crying out for the charitable concern. Rather, the concept of the woman was recasted as an able, enlightened entity over the existing conception of a woman being a docile, passive object meant for the gratification of the male sexual urge. He inculcated an atmosphere where a sympathetic awareness of the women cause was promoted. For Gandhi, the projected male sexuality was typified as humiliation of and aggression towards women which if restricted could be channelised in other productive ways for the benefit of the nation.

The new image of women visualised by Gandhi was highly influenced by the political, historical and the social needs of that time and particularly served one common goal: that of uniting the women from different social strata against the common enemy – the British imperialists. His reaction against the exploitation of women drew force from the Upanishadic notion of the *Brahman* and the *Atman*. According to the Indian Upanishads, every human soul *(Atman)* is identical to the transcendental *Brahman/Paramatman* (an evolved, enlightened stage of the soul). Reinforcing such knowledge from the Hindu metaphysics into his own life, Gandhi realised that every human soul, irrespective of the gender or caste is on a similar footing because both man and woman have the same *Atman* within them. This prompted Gandhi's project of making the 'abla' woman evolve into the 'sabla' individual.

Gandhi's Views on Marriage, Partnership and Sexuality

According to Madhu Kishwar (1985), Gandhi was a revolutionary as well as a liberationist. While the other Indian reformers considered women to be mere recipients of the national development, Gandhi chose to involve them in the development process by providing them with greater agency, thereby making them 'self-conscious arbitraries to their own destiny'. In his quest of changing the key aspects of the usual power dynamics between a man and his wife in the Indian society, Gandhi propagated the key idea of becoming equal partners and not sharing the relationship of a master and a slave. Instead of domination, mutual respect and love in a marriage could lead to the proper amalgamation of two individuals in body and spirit. He stood strongly against the dowry system and advocated remarriage of child widows. According to many scholars, Gandhi's commitment to the feminine cause was more of a personal journey for the Mahatma where he strived to resonate the feminine thoughts and actions within himself. In his book *Gandhi's Religion: A Homespun Shawl*, J Jordens (1998) writes: "He (Gandhi) wanted to feel about women, not as a male, but as a woman and wanted to be accepted by them not as a male, but as a sister and a mother."

In fact, Gandhi himself has acknowledged this transition when he writes how he deliberately wants to feel like a eunuch mentally. Gandhi believed that women were superior to men in their physical, mental and spiritual constituency and by aligning to the rigours of femininity, he would get closer to his aspiration of attaining Brahmacharya. Evolving from the same conviction of the superiority of womanhood, Gandhi believed that for the success of Satyagraha, the Indian women had to be his apostles of faith. Women, Gandhi believed, are the incarnation of Ahimsa. With their infinite ability to suffer, persevere, love and sacrifice, Gandhi believed them to be the agents of his non-violent passive resistance.

In his ideal world order, every individual would manifest both masculine and feminine traits (not in their physiological characteristics but in their mind frame). He hoped that doing so would mitigate a lot of social evils. Not only would this check the prevalent patriarchy in the society, it would also combat gender discrimination in multiple spheres. Through his national movements and his life lessons, Gandhi legitimated and structured androgynous elements in the concept of the Indian manhood. David Cortright, in his book *Gandhi and Betond: Nonviolence for an Age of Terrorism,* points out that Gandhi "… tried to break gender roles both politically and in the home. He wanted to liberate men as well as women, to transcend gender roles and stereotypes."

Though Gandhi's views on sexuality may raise eyebrows today, he emphasized that a marriage should be based purely on mutual love, respect and partnership and only achieves its truest meaning when the husband and the wife, devoid of their sexual urges, love each other like siblings and work for the world as partners. Celibacy, for Gandhi, was of primary importance in order to live a respectable and a higher form of life. It was important even for a married couple to restrain the sexual urge. For Gandhi, the 'animal passion' or the 'bestial lust' was an impediment in itself for successful marriages. Copulation between a married couple should only be a means of extending the progeny and not of satisfying carnal pleasures. Gandhi also urged the woman to have a heightened self-esteem of herself and be the custodian of her own body and self. She should be able to fend off her husband and refuse any sort of sexual advances.

The essence of Gandhi's views in this regard has been aptly summarised by Ahish Nandy (1987): "For Gandhi, manliness and womanliness are equal, but the ability to transcend the man-woman dichotomy is superior to both"… quintessential to the process of evolution of the human kind."

Sieving Gandhi: Gandhi's influence on Paulo Coelho

Gandhian principles of life have been reckoned and resorted to numerous times in the history of the world. Among the many, Gandhi has found an ardent admirer in the famous Brazilian author and lyricist Paulo Coelho. Himself a United Nations Messenger of Peace, an ambassador of European Union for Intercultural Dialogue, and a UNESCO Special Counselor for Intercultural Dialogues and Spiritual Convergences, Coelho is immensely inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and considers Gandhi and Nelson Mandela as two of the most influential men of all times. Not only in numerous interviews, but also on his blog, Coelho has time and again referred to the teachings of the Mahatma and has held Gandhian principles and way of life in heightened reverence. On a number of occasions, Coelho has looked up to the exemplary lives of Gandhi, Teresa, Luther and others to purge his own fallacies and that of the characters in his noveles.

Coelho imbibes in himself and his characters a Gandhian commitment to action. For Coelho, the human action or the performance of it for the sake of the righteous cause is of primary importance. His novel *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* ends with the line:""Go and get your things," he said. "Dreams mean work."" (Coelho, 2005) In a different context, on his blog, Coelho again heralds the Gandhian principle of action when he identifies how action expresses the priorities of an individual. In his blog article 'Gandhi's Top 10', Coelho quotes Gandhi's principle that "an ounce of practise is worth tonnes of preaching." (Paulo Coelho Blog, 2011)

While answering a question on his blog, Coelho claims that the secret of happiness is basically an abstract notion. One's commitment to life and the essential belief system determines the kind of satisfaction one would experience out of the human life. While emphasizing on such commitment to life and belief system as Gandhi's, Coelho however believes that in one's pursuit of finding the purpose, one need not lead a monastic life. He opines that in order to experience life, one should be able to be at 'the centre of its turmoil' and not out of it. To suffer and overcome the mountains posed by the society, by the family and by one's own expectation, one should never flee in order to avoid it. Rather, holding true to their principles, one should face and overcome it. Thus rather than blindly adopting Gandhian views at their face value, Coelho adapts them to our times and imbibes them in modern life. He sieves out the noble visions of Gandhi - such as the commitment to non-violence and constructive work, the partnership of man and woman as equals, the force of love in bringing about social change - that stand the test of time from the dictatorial bindings - such as an essentialist viewing of gender roles and prohibition of carnal desires - that were only a product of his contemporary societal superstructure. Drawing the attention of the readers to the modesty of the Mahatma, Coelho quotes Gandhi: "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is practise them on a far vaster scale that seemed possible to me." (Paulo Coelho Blog, 2008)

Coelho visualizes a metaphorical Warrior of Light which on many grounds tries to emulate the Gandhian characteristics. He has been able to renounce vengeance, provocation and time. The Warrior of Light is this superior being, who has evolved over the drab human existence, for whom the 'conquest' matters more than the 'result' and yet he is not indifferent to the result. He is indifferent to the opinions of the baser men who are incapable of transcending and reaching up to him. In his journey towards renouncing provocation, he is in supreme control of his sensory organs; he is able to detach himself from his surroundings and analyse whether his actions are influenced by his egoism or is to be followed in order to fulfil the God's will. While renouncing provocation, the Warrior of Light evolves into this superior being who fends off his opponents without taking the fight to the level of physicality. In his attempt of renouncing time, the Warrior detaches himself from the larger schemes of 'days' and 'hours' and meticulously deals with the minutes. Referring to the Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu, Coelho says that by paying attention to the smaller things, he manages to protect himself and the society from greater calamities. It is quite interesting to notice here that the refusal of vengeance, provocation, time and comfort by the Warrior of Light is quite similar to the things Gandhi had renounced in his attempt of gaining Brahmacharya and furthering his movement of Non-Cooperation. On the contrary, Coelho's spiritual search does not necessitate Gandhi's need for celibacy while acknowledging and even following his guiding principles on the path to discovering the truth.

Influence of Gandhian Views on Coelho's *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*

On many levels, Coelho's views about man and woman being equal partners working together for the collective good draw heavily from Gandhi. The world sketched by Coelho in most of his novels shows a similar striving in his characters. The Gandhian principle of aiming for the individual and the collective good appears to be ingrained within both the author and his literary creations.

The most notable of such influence is traceable in his novel *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* which charts the spiritual journey of the female protagonist Pilar. The novel clearly demonstrates the author's ideas about the partnership of man and woman in his fictional yet ideal world. The protagonist Pilar is like every other woman, attending University and keeping up with the usual chores of life, which in the course of the narration, takes a colossal turn. Coelho outlines her gradual spiritual evolution while providing meticulous description of the confusion, apprehension, reluctance and disbelief that the protagonist has to overcome in her quest for spiritual transformation, all the while being aided by her partner to cultivate the strength in her soul. The story bears testimony to the uniting force of spirituality and the sustenance of two souls on the basis of love and healing. It is a tale of mutual emancipation of two lovers who complement each other. While at the apparent level, the novel comes across as a romantic tale, at the metaphorical level, it explores how love rescues the human soul from boundedness and liberates it.

Gandhi believed that the ideal relation a man and his wife should share in a conjugal life is that of partners. Instead of assuming the roles of the dominator and dominated, mutual love and respect must be the secret to a happy marriage. In the novel *By the River Piedra I sat down and Wept*, the reader notices a reflection of similar thoughts. Coelho sketches the characters of Pilar and her partner (who is a spiritual leader without a name) such that they

complement and support each other throughout the narrative during times of crises, helping each other get back on the right course of action: on the path of working together for humanity. Pilar embarks on a spiritual journey with her lover where she progresses from shredding her doubts, fighting her inhibitions, dismantling her own belief system to finally exposing her cloistered soul to love. Her partner's inclination towards spirituality, his zeal for relieving human agony and his love for the society and Pilar affect her the most, breaking her convictions and transforming her. The transgressive power of love, like the Alchemist's stone, transforms the base mortal soul of Pilar into one of the most distinguished ones.

Voicing the essential Gandhian belief, a Padre (a Spanish religious leader), in the later part of the novel, explains how spirituality can be multidimensional with no set path for attainment. One can transgress the mundane and heal others through spirituality even while being in a conjugal relationship, being affectionate towards one individual in particular and caring for the entire society at large. Through the novel, Coelho builds up to the moment of epiphany when both Pilar and her partner realise that their dream of serving humankind is mutual and shared, and in their journey of spirituality, each would benevolently complement the other. The man, in spite of being the enlightened spiritual leader, had drifted from the path that was destined for him and given into corporeal aspirations. He accepts how Pilar's love for him and his life-goals has saved him and brought him back to his cause of commitment. Gandhi's views about woman being the ideal partner of man in his pursuits of righteousness resonate here. The characters of Pilar and her lover, being perfect mouthpieces of the author, help Coelho portray the emancipatory role love can exhibit. Pilar's act of persuading her lover into continuing with his purpose of life shows that her love is not a hindrance but an aid in the path of emancipation and self-realization. She does not want to love her man in a way which would confine him within the four walls of the household and deprive the world from being healed of their physical, mental and spiritual ailments. Her love is emancipatory and gains its fruition by spreading joy in the world around.

The novel perfectly embodies the Gandhian principle of an ideal man-woman relationship which advocates equal partnership and the need for a greater spiritual union over the physical one. The journey of Pilar and her partner comes across as a literary translation of Gandhi's own words: "The wife is not the husband's bondslave, but his companion and his helpmate, and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows – as free as the husband to choose her own path... Spiritual relationship is far more precious than physical" (Gandhi, 2005). However, it differs from Gandhi in its unabashed acceptance and validation of sexuality in the partnership, a sexuality which is not just permitted but essential in generating the life force with which the partners work together as a team for a greater good and progress on their spiritual journey. This departure from Gandhi may at best be seen as a recontextualisation of Gandhian beliefs in today's times and does not stop Coelho from admiring and adapting Gandhian views to his life and writings. Drawing from Gandhi, the novel still asserts that the blossoming of the human love between the souls of a man and woman should evolve into a universal love for the greater good of mankind.

Contextualising, Decontextualising and Recontextualising Gandhi

The Cambridge dictionary defines 'context' as 'the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it'. Therefore to contextualise would mean 'to consider something in its context', to decontextualise would indicate 'removing something from its context' and to recontextualise would stand for 'placing or viewing something in a new context, possibly to suggest a different interpretation'.

Sujata Patel in her article "Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi" notes that "…his (Gandhi's) personal resolutions are rooted in the social pattern and ideologies of the historical moment in which he lived. Any analysis of his ideology has to understand the social roots of his perceptions, if it has to make a critical evaluation of Gandhi and understand the relevance of his ideas today". In other words Patel urges the critics of Gandhi to contextualise him to his time period while analysing his opinions and philosophies. Gandhi has often been criticised by many scholars who have blamed him and his sensibilities of being affected by his superstructure of being a "high-caste, middle-class Hindu male". However these blames could neither malign nor diminish the Gandhian influence in India or worldwide. In India, the overarching presence of the Gandhian spirit ranges from the Indian literature of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Ananad, Raja Rao to the directive principles enshrined in the constitution of India- influencing the everyday lives of the state and its people. However, on a closer look, certain Gandhian principles do not seem to be suited for the general civilians in the mesh of modern day life. The materialist, agnostic, consumerist age of globalization does not necessarily adhere to the prospects of Brahmacharya or the Swadeshi movement. But that does not necessitate that we abandon Gandhi, nor does it dictate that we follow him blindly. There is, as Sujata Patel suggests, indeed an immense need for the contextualisation of his ideas in his own times to avoid misinterpretation. His time-bound dictums need to be separated from his timeless messages and teachings, and such messages that hold promise for the world today need to be decontextualised and, further, recontextualised to suit the needs of our times.

Gandhi was a national figure of a historical time with a completely different set of social milieu than the one found today. Some of his principles and essentialist ideas that constitute his perspective might not be in sync with the ways of the modern world. For example, Gandhi genuinely believed in the school of 'Biological essentialism' which proclaimed that man and woman, though similar on the spiritual basis are different in their physical orientation and it is necessary to maintain a difference. Even while reflecting on women's emancipation, he had his own reservations. For extra income, a woman, according to Gandhi must only spin the wheel for Khadi. Any other occupation which would necessitate the woman to get out of the household was not considered to be respectable by Gandhi. Moreover, his emphasis on *brahmacharya* or celibacy almost took a turn towards an obsession. In his scheme of things, Gandhi expects an absolutely 'de-sexed' woman, someone who would sacrifice her sexuality, her family life only to dedicate herself to the service of the nation. In fact, even the married woman was to restrain herself from her husband, a proposition hardly feasible in reality. Gandhi believed that "the very purpose of marriage is restraint and sublimation of sexual passion" (Gandhi, 2005). Quite contrary to Gandhi's obsession for celibacy and abstinence from sexual intercourse, the famous economist and social scientist Amartya Sen, in a different era, emphasised the need of

copulation for the adequate development of human abilities. Sen devised the Capabilities Approach with Martha Nussbaum to measure the development of human capabilities in order to maximise their potential. Out of the different parameters mentioned by them, the proper maintenance of sexual and reproductive health and the availability of opportunities for sexual satisfaction are also emphasised. Thus, while Gandhi had noble intentions in structuring his philosophy, he was still governed by his superstructure and does not necessarily deserve to be faulted for it. It is, in fact, the need of the hour, to filter Gandhi's teachings through the sieve of the present times, retain his visionary messages that remain relevant even today, recontextualise and adapt them to our times, and assimilate them in our lives.

Coelho's adaption of Gandhian principles needs to be looked at from this perspective. His belief system majorly intercedes within the Gandhian realm but the author prudently picks and prunes some of the Gandhian teachings. Unlike Gandhi, Coelho's characters are not devoid of sexual intimacy; he does not portray the need of celibacy. In fact, in the novel *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wet,* the characters show how monasticism is not at all a prerequisite for spiritual upliftment. Coelho's characters often see the face of spirituality in their highest moments of orgasmic ecstasy, achieving a union with the divine through a union with the beloved. Coelho's principles, as have been discussed in the previous segment, have prominent reflections of the Gandhian spirit and yet are devoid of its prohibitions and conditions, thereby making it a possible option to imbibe while being rooted in the present times.

The neo-Gandhian world that Coelho carves out for his novels can prove to be just one of the many versions of Gandhian principles which can be modelled to suit present-day sensibilities. Gandhi's essentialist views on women advocating 'a vital difference between the two sexes' - the conceptualisation of woman as 'passive' suited to the role of a caretaker of children and a mistress of the house and man as 'active' suited to the role of a breadwinner for the family' – therefore must be looked at as a product of his contemporary societal context. His condemnation of lust and copulation for carnal pleasures as an act of 'animality' must also be read in his contemporary context of extremely high birth rate coupled with poverty in India. However faulted these views seem in the present times, Gandhi surely has more to offer even to our generation and to our times. Despite being tied to the essentialist view of the household being the woman's arena, Gandhi advocated that the "society should not put any restraint on women who want to become economically independent… such women should be let free to choose whatever profession they wish to excel" (Kolge, 2017), an idea that still remains relevant in the world today. Gandhi believed that "woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust... She must refuse to adorn herself for men including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man" (Gandhi, 1921). While his obsession with the prohibition of carnal pleasures need not be inherited and idealised, his empowering of women to own their bodies and be able to refuse physicality even to their husbands is a vision that transgresses time and has much to offer even today. Gandhi emphasised that "the only honourable terms in marriage are mutual love and mutual consent." (Gandhi, 2005). As Coelho shows us, the Gandhian concept of man-woman partnership for a greater good of humankind holds much promise in the world even today, and does not deserve to be discarded only because Gandhi prohibited a sexual angle to it. The essence of Gandhian principles and not the dictums need to be imbibed in

the changing times because they still hold the secret to a better world. Thus, this paper attempts to assert that Gandhian sensibility is too valuable to lock up in the cupboards of the past away from the sun and winds of the day. Gandhi needs to be understood in context but not abandoned there; his thoughts that surpass time need to be decontextualised and adapted to rather than adopted in our times through recontextualisation, because Gandhian ideals and ways of life still have plenty to teach the world and lead the way in the days ahead.

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