



## **IDENTITY FORMATION IN EAST-WEST CULTURE IN ANURAG MATHUR'S, "THE INSCRUTABLE AMERICANS"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The process of globalization has resulted in bringing different cultures closer than earlier. 'Culture' as a concept refers to the different aspects of behavioural characteristics as religion, language, rituals, dress, traditions, values, interest, and food habits etc. typical to the group. In Anurag Mathur's novel "The Inscrutable Americans", Gopal Kumar, the main character, goes to America to study chemical engineering where he comes across various cultural differences. While maintaining his ethnic attitude, he also understands these cross-cultural differences. He has to grapple with language, racial and ethnic issues. His condition reflects his encounter with two cultures of India and America. This paper highlighting the cultural differences and their subsequent impact on the common man's life, encourages the concept of 'a global village with multiculturalism' in order to minimize the cultural differences and tries to analyze the novel with the two approaches- Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism.*

**Key words-** Culture, behavioural characteristics, cross-cultural differences, ethnic multiculturalism, Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism.

### **INTRODUCTION**



The last few decades have been a time of rapid social and cultural changes in the world. Wave after wave of immigration has encouraged the inter-dependence. It has altered the ethnic and social composition of cities and the whole countries. Unity in diversity is becoming a dominating feature of modern life. It is valued for its contribution to the society and its undermining effects on national identity. At the same time, the ever increasing globalization of economy, commerce and education has brought a new type of change. It has also promoted a growing homogenization among different countries and it acts as an accelerator to national culture. “Cultural Relativism” is the principle or an approach that suggests that an individual human's beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual's own culture. This principle was established as axiomatic in anthropological research by Franz Boas in the first few decades of the 20th century and later popularized by his students. It is the view that all beliefs, customs, and ethics are relative to the individual within his own social context. In other words, “right” and “wrong” are culture-specific; what is considered moral in one society may be considered immoral in another, and, since no universal standard of morality exists, no one has the right to judge another society's customs. It compares the values and behaviours of different cultures and usually judges them against standards of right and wrong for our own culture. This approach to other cultures becomes a barrier when one assumes that cultural beliefs, values and behaviours are wrong if they differ from those of our own culture and this happens in the case of Gopal who is bewildered to see the culture of America.

The term ‘ethnocentrism’ was coined by William G. Sumner, upon observing the tendency for people to differentiate between the one group and others. He defined it as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it”. He further characterized it as often leading to pride, vanity, beliefs of one's own group's superiority, and contempt of outsiders. It is the view that one particular ethnic group is somehow superior to all others and that individual beliefs and values systems are culturally relative. That is, no ethnic group has the right to say that their particular system of beliefs and values, their worldview, is in any way superior to anyone else's system of beliefs and values. What's right for one culture might be wrong for another and that's alright. There is no absolute standard of right and wrong by which to compare and contrast morally contradictory values. The word ‘ethnocentrism’ derives from the Greek word ‘ethnos’, meaning “nation” or “people,” and the English word “center”. It is the inherent belief that our own cultural traditions, beliefs and values are correct and superior. This natural tendency or attitude is found in all cultures. It causes to judge others by our own values. If a person is born and brought up in a foreign culture, the values just described there probably seem right to him or her. That person may wonder why the rest of the world does not function in the same prevalent way. People of the world are ethnocentric to some degree. Beliefs, values, traditions and behaviours that are different from those of our culture may appear to us as strange, or even wrong. It is the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or

cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one's own. The ethnocentric individual will judge other groups relative to his or her own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion. These ethnic distinctions serve to define each ethnicity's unique cultural identity as in the novel, 'The Inscrutable Americans' (1991) by Anurag Mathur, the writer weaves with great sensitivity and panache a tale of a small-town boy named Gopal kumar, the son of a hair oil tycoon in Madhya Pradesh who arrives in America to study chemical engineering in a university in Eversville. He sees himself as a cultural ambassador and tells another Indian friend that because of India's superior culture, they must set an example so that the Americans will improve their behaviour and therefore, India's bilateral relations with America will drastically improve. The novel though written in a comic vein, highlights cultural life, cultural expression, achievements and the like. Because of all the funny episodes which it offers, it is a comical celebration of both Indian and American cultures. It opens on a comical note with an extremely hilarious letter that Gopal, the protagonist writes to his brother on his arrival into the world of prof. Sam. During the period of studying chemical engineering in America, through the whole year, he encounters several of what he calls 'the inscrutable symbols' of America like Randy, his one constant companion in the Lala Land, Peacock, who shows him that discrimination and poverty co-exist with the prosperity that envelop the rest of white America, and a series of romantic misadventures with Sue, Bernice, Ann and Gloria to name a few. Armed with a master's degree and the experience of having spent a year discovering the intrigue that is America, he goes back rejuvenated to the sojourns of hometown, Jajau. He is funny, thoughtful and astute in equal measure. He brings the readers face to face with the American culture from a delightfully new angle. In a funny way, he describes America as—

*"Most surprising thing about America is it is full of Americans. Everywhere Americans, Americans, big and white, it is little frightening". (Page 9)*

He confronts a multicultural society. He analyses the two cultures of the two countries- India and America. There are several instances where he expresses cultural relative views as –

*"I must say Americans are very advanced". (Page 10)*

*"I think these Americans are strange but friendly people in their hearts."(Page 10)*

He opines –

*"Now I have been to American party also and behaving with credits I feel I am knowing many all things now". (P- 77)*

He feels –

*“Transplanted to America, however, they were transformed into paragons of efficiency and tolerance.” (P-148)*

*“He found the American educational process so exhilarating, so encouraging, so immediate in its rewards, that he found he didn’t really need more than academics to keep him content.” (P- 226)*

*“In America, he found that encouragement, yet simultaneously he found that the American students seemed unable to utilize the truly astonishing opportunities that their educational system offered at the higher levels” (P-146)*

He feels he is an embodiment of Indian culture. He expresses ethnic views –

*“I feel each and every one of us is serving as ambassador of our beloved motherland”. (P- 10)*

*I am saying clearly that due to India’s glorious heritage and things like that I am not indulging. I am thinking they are very impressed due to high morals I am upholding on behalf of Nation.” (P- 77)*

*“I feel that we are all ambassadors from our country to America and if we are behaving well then they are having us in their good books. .... that because of our superior culture and all that we must set an example so that the Americans will improve their behaviour and I feel that relations and things like that will also improve and trade and all that also.” (P- 24)*

He has fears like other stereotyped notions and prejudices of Indian migrants in their adoptive land. As he was terrified in a new atmosphere—

*“He was actually and really here. The excitement made him shiver. It was all so alien, so wonderful yet so scary. Would he adjust, would they like him, would they be friendly, would he do well in class, where would he get vegetarian food cooked by Brahmins?” (P- 16)*

He is a rural boy. He is singularly a virgin. He has a rustic undertone while the other characters in the novel are sophisticated in their American ways as far as food, women and dating are concerned. Though his disastrous English and pious Judgments which his ears ring

with prediction of doom from mother and grandmother if he so much looked at beef or girls, he retains a gentle dignity. He leaves America still a virgin.

In a way, he tries to keep maintaining the ideologies of Indian culture. He has been the recipient of the 'Most Promising Young Man of the Year' Certificate that All India Association of Hair Oil Dealers issues to him back in Jajau which he keeps in mind. He even tries to find greater meaning and depth in his perceptions about America. There is no self-contempt or post-colonial anguish in him. He matures into a reasonably suave personality and takes back with him a little more than superfluous impressions of America, that he evolves into a thinking individual willing to make a difference to his life in India based on his learning in the U.S. He believes that a higher Calling is awaiting him.

He represents bourgeois materialism. As the bourgeois individual, he exhibits a new kind of (middle class) consciousness, and a new sensibility in relation to his relations with other people. He holds primarily a view that the individual is significant in his own right, rather than having his significance subsumed by the general needs of society.

The novel may be described as a 'Cultural mosaic' as it focuses on interaction and communication between two different cultures. Interactions of cultures provide opportunities for the cultural differences to communicate and interact to create multiculturalism.

Gopal's character indicates that the preservation of cultures is premised on a problematic view of culture and of the individual's relationship to culture. The cosmopolitan view of culture is that Cultures are not distinct but self-contained wholes. They have long interacted and influenced one-another through war, imperialism, trade and migration. National Cultural Variables- religion, language, economy, Education, Politics, and Ethics etc. affect our behaviour and values. The reason of this cultural difference is the different cultures with different concepts, experiences and views etc. Individual cultural values and beliefs also affect one's behaviour and values. These differences in values, beliefs lead to differences in our practices, behaviour and walks of life.

'The Inscrutable Americans' by Anurag Mathur confronting the east-west issues is fabricated with the elements of multiculturalism and ethnocentrism. The protagonist, Gopal plays a vital role in understanding the cultural differences. He even tries to maintain the ethnic attitude. He not only understands his own culture but also keeps an open mind, respects differences, adapts to cultural patterns of America and ensures the cultural advancement on a global level.



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