

Political Repercussions of War Literature: Flamboyance and Degradation in Churchill's Select Works

Sarika Goyal

Associate Professor, DAV College, Abohar, Punjab

Research Scholar

Faculty of Sciences, Humanities and Languages

Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India

Abstract

The paper attempts to claim that Churchill has been unduly venerated for generations in Europe and America as a demi-god securing victory in second World War with his farsightedness and political strategy whereas he maintains flamboyance by his lucid prose and narcissistic writings on wars in different parts of the world. These literary texts, the paper suggests were rather colonial in the true sense where he not only degrades the locals for their vulnerability and lack of military strength before the British but also celebrates the European dominance even at the cost of massacres in the name of empire. The paper also highlights his derogatory and racist comments despite his stature as a prime minister of Britain. His strategic speeches and writing with the powerful rhetoric created an illusion of a wise man and a great leader but that greatness was achieved by manipulating millions in Britain and elsewhere. The paper will also explore his mercurial relationship with India and her spiritual thought.

Keywords: Vrindavan, Churchill, war, historicity, Malakand

Histories of the world have always been controversial as being produced under power dynamics. The hagiographic accounts of kings, reigns, empires, legendary heroes, viceroys and other political personages are excellent examples of narrativity but highly manipulative on account of historicity. The alternate versions are publicly burnt, disfigured or disallowed publishing if they threaten the established norm or dare to challenge any claims of supremacy. The word that sees the light of the day and is circulated widely as books, broadcast or digitally made available to the masses is internalized as the ultimate truth.

Winston Churchill, the second most published author after G. B. Shaw, was aware of the impact of this published history in public realm. Being highly ambitious, he knew how to gain estate despite his position in the middle order in his family lineage. In a fast-changing world, political arena promised that power and influence which was denied in hierarchical order of the family tree. He would not rest till he turned this disadvantage to a purpose. The way of gaining entry to the political world was by working for the empire and that obviously meant participation in imperial wars. He experienced things firsthand and wrote accounts. He scribbled extensively and strategically to persuade and dissuade ordinary and political populace. He depicted ruined

landscapes and trenches in words in his books while painting real landscapes and seascapes like his contemporary Adolf Hitler. He also influenced some leading statesmen of his time and gained prestigious positions in governance by sheer wit, oratory and foresight. He planned meticulously thereafter to rocket his political career.

Hitler wanted a clean landscape devoid of Jews and let loose genocide on a race. Churchill hated the savagery of other nations and formulated strategy for his performance in the 'Theatre of war.' As a paradox, he was awarded a Nobel prize in Literature for his war accounts by a committee that proclaimed another prize for promotion of peace.

This research aims to analyze select texts, speeches and memoirs by Winston Churchill as war literature. The imperial and world wars fought during these times were part propaganda, part geopolitics and part patriotic heroism of the British officers sans native ranks. The texts offer a postcolonial and ecological analysis while affirming the historicity of these periods. The deaths of soldiers in the alien battlefields, the commands of the political figures, the victims of battles from all ranks including the enemies of the empire otherwise heirs of the landmasses and their culture, slaughterhouses at frontlines, trench warfare and ruined landscapes that were once beauty, mystery and exotica to the European cartographers need a critique of the texts. Explorations of St. Thomas Aquinas's thought and Just War Theory further problematize these narratives from a postcolonial angle where anglicization of native culture, destruction of local landscapes, mass killings of natives for the greed of power can not be termed just by any means. Looking closely, one analyses that there are no traumatic renderings and no psychological scars visible anywhere as these are erased under the flamboyance of an ambitious leader and sealed in boxes stamped with Signia of Empire. The moralists have no ethical questions to ask, and the proponents of modern warfare are all applause for the strategies of suppression and brutal erasures.

A look into the biography of Churchill explains to a certain extent as to what inspired Churchill for such ambitious projects. Was it pure ambition to lead the Empire or had it something to do with his visions as a painter? Here one equates him with Adolf Hitler as a painter and a strategist. Adolf Hitler was rejected by Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. Most of his paintings like 'House at a lake with mountains' (1910), Alpenhof (1926) and Neuschwanstein Castle have royal architectural buildings whereas an untouched landscape forms the backdrop. It appears as if aristocracy has every right to dominate nature. This also owes to the reign of a family over a huge land mass. It has been researched that Hitler loved landscapes in their serenity as untouched. Some of his paintings depict ruins as well. According to Wikipedia he painted as a soldier in WWI and did that at the front. Churchill also painted serene, wild and untamed landscapes and seascapes. "The Churchill Minute" exhibits some of his paintings like View of Miami at Sunset, Leaning Palm Jamaica, Firth of Forth etc. (Riley). Most of these paintings depict British ships over sea surface, prizes of battle and landscapes of other continents. These paintings not only exhibit the geopolitics where all continents are to be engulfed and captured

but also offer a chance to the busiest man to slow down. The description of landscapes in memoirs by Churchill also reflect on his vision as a painter. As a statesman he would cast eyes on a certain piece of land and devise means to annex it to the empire. He writes that painting is like a battle. It is like “unfolding a long, sustained, interlocked argument” (Muller 327).

Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was a great orator. He would write speeches with strong arguments and rhetoric and will deliver the same in the British parliament. As a strategist, he did not wait for anyone from posterity to write for him a biographical account that could fall prey to subjectivity and scrutiny. His speeches are voluminous in 30 volumes. He started writing to earn money as he got half a crown for a word and therefore his speeches are extraordinarily long and his books are also copious. Larry Arn notes that he ‘explains things a lot out of prudence for influencing value judgements’ by clarifying why he made certain choices as a statesman and what circumstances led to those choices. He further elaborates that whereas ancients devoted a lifetime imagining ideal republics, Churchill, the leader in aviation and involved in invention of nuclear bomb talks about the mass effects of immense human power created by modern science. He quotes from Churchill who advocated controlling this power both during war and peace to avoid complete destruction and for the fear of forming an idle society. In another lecture, “why was Churchill afraid of modern war,” he remarks that Churchill knew that European war is a heart-rendering struggle. It contains seeds of destruction, but his bigotry is evident from the fact that he knew war guaranteed political entry. He fought Sudan war for a purpose, worked as a journalist in Boer war, escaped from prison and entered parliament in 1901 to deliver a speech on expanding British army. He also advocated for the need to keep fleet and reduce the size of regular soldiers for sustaining a war affected economy in his ‘Army Reform’ Speech. He quotes from his book ‘Churchill’s Trial’ that the leader considered WWI a loss to the victors and the losers. In this World crisis, the victors are not stealing property of the losers like the ancients but rather are concerned with rescue of the wounded and exchange of prisoners. He hated march of humans against artillery and advocated use of powerful weapons to win war cheaply and quickly. In his speeches, he advocated that war must be avoided by compromising, entering some alliance or putting up strong defence. Antagonistically, he built up strategy for just war by controlling others from going to war. Arn quotes from Churchill that ‘war is a potent agent in the destinies and development of humanity’ though he admits his failure in controlling both WW I and WWII.

In a speech delivered in 1938 on civilization, he talks about violence, role of warriors, the conditions of camps and warfare, of riot and tyranny throughout the period of human history giving place to parliaments where laws are made (Rhodes 5990). He also talks about the subordination of ruling authority to the settled customs of the people and to their will as expressed through the constitution. These views are controvertible when it comes to territories under British occupation.

As the viceroy of India, he is believed to have relieved people from a severe famine in Bengal. It is believed that he provided food to Bengal despite shortage in Italy and Greece and imported

grain from Iraq, Australia and Canada (Masani, Churchill and the Genocide Myth). Madhusree Mukherjee in her “Churchill’s Secret War” refutes claims of his generosity. She took data from 2 rice research stations and contends that he refused grain from Australia and Canada and rather exported Bengal grain to Ceylon. Under the threat of Japan invading Bengal and patrolling with submarines, hoarding by local grain merchants and deliberate shortages created by Marwari Congress leaders against Muslim government, there are sufficient claims to support that Churchill could have saved Bengal from thousands of deaths. In his DNA analysis “Winston Churchill: hero or villain”, Sudhir Chaudhary analyses that there were 40 lac deaths in Bengal famine in 1943 which is closer to the figures during Covid pandemic. He also quotes Mukherjee that despite the shortage of food faced in India, Churchill sent 400 crore kg wheat, 140 kg sugar, 160 kg meat, 409000 live animals, 32 crore kg fish, 13 crore kg rice and 20 crore kg tea and 41 lac liters of wine for soldiers engaged in war. Choudhary mentions that Bose’s request to import 1 ton of grain was refused. Michel Safi also holds Churchill responsible for the famine who disliked Indian population ‘breeding like rabbits’ and was undeterred at the loss of 3 million lives over the exhaustive use of Indian resources despite warnings by his war cabinet. Churchill justified it to his opponents in British parliament that he has confiscated boats of rice to starve Japanese army entering India.

Churchill became the Secretary of State for the colonies in Feb 1921. A secretary is appointed by the monarch on the advice of the PM, and he had no authority for provinces and princely states of India. This prestigious position was due to his accounts of brave wars like “The story of the Malakand Field Force”, 1898 and History of English-Speaking peoples of the world. As a secretary of state for war and air from Jan 1919 to Feb 1921, he was responsible for demobilization of army, intervention in Russia and the Irish crisis. He also served as the First Lord of Admiralty from 1911-1915, which roughly coincides with the start of WWI. In “The World Crisis” he refers to the war text as a “mix of military history . . . diplomatic and political history, portraits of other political and military figures, and personal memoir.”

In his “Iron Curtain Speech” he discusses the threatening role of Soviet Russia that desires indefinite expansion of their power and their doctrines along with Germany’s awful fate under Hitler. He believes that these leaders have satisfied their private ambitions beyond their wildest dreams. This iron curtain that separates Russia from Europe has brought much rivalry according to him. He opposed the appeasing of Hitler as he believed that “Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonour, they chose dishonour. They will have war.”

Such speeches proclaim him as a great political leader with wisdom, foresight and military strategy but ignore his bigotry and imperial nature. While narrating the story of Malakand, he writes that “they (Frontier Wars) are but the surf that marks the edge and the advance of the wane of civilization.” Therefore claiming the war to be just, he denies the role of any political leader in averting such bloodsheds by referring to “that lord Elgin’s viceroyalty and the famine year should have been marked with the greatest frontier war in the history of British Empire in India,

vividly displays how little an individual, how earnest his motives, however great his authority, can really control the cause of public affairs” (98). Praising Lord Elgin as a viceroy and naming it as an impetuous emergency he ignores the economic and military losses. Counting the loss of the soldiers of Punjab infantry 24th and 31st, 38th Dogras, No. 8 Bengal Mountain Battery, 35th and 45th Sikh regiments, others from Madras as natives killed and wounded in battle where none for him deserves a special mention or name, he praises Major General Bindon Blood who was ‘a general and administrator produced by the responsibilities and dangers of empire’ (104). He admires his bravery and justifies his knighthood and the medals he earned for the man had ‘shot every species of Indian game’ and nearly 30 tigers (103). Chitral in Malakand was a ‘road to Russia’ (51) and could maintain the ‘pendulum of politics.’ The Britishers for him were bringing civilization, commerce and riches to the Mahomedan religions of sword and the land threatened by tribal revolts. The work refers extensively to the landscape and its unmanned passes, circular hillocks, tribal rivalry and the dead soldiers and enemies scattered in open.

Churchill had a capricious relation with India. Zareer Masani notes in the Churchill Paradox his mercurial relation with the country, its religion, its politicians and its geographic location. According to him Churchill considered India a jewel in British crown whose independence would make Britain a second-rate power. Therefore, as a politician it was fit for him to oppose Stafford Cripps offer for a National Coalition Govt at the Centre. Reviewing the book ‘Fighting Retreat: Winston Churchill and India’ by Walter Reid, he proclaims Churchill’s hatred of India in general and its Hindu community in particular. Furious over Gandhi’s Quit India during WWII, he ‘condemned noisy, garish and unscientific Hindu idolatry’ and proclaimed that India ‘s Hindus were a “beastly people with a beastly religion.” He hated Hindus to the extent that he showed concern for Indian Muslims, Dalits and autonomous princely states. Though he admired the loyalty of Sikh troops that formed about 62% by 1929. On one hand he condemns Butcher Dyer’s action as “un-British monstrosity” and on the other his policies were ‘responsible for failed constitutional progress and cataclysm of partition’. In the ‘River of War’ he criticizes dervishes and their Islamic society for their camels that charged on British artillery, they lacked martial technology and treated women like property. Though he praised gallantry of Indian soldiers, he criticized national leaders, Bose for being a Japanese ally and Gandhi for his Hindu rituals blackmailing people emotionally. It was only in independent India when he termed Nehru as ‘light of Asia’ (Hindustan Times). It cannot be entirely due to his administrative ability but perhaps on account of his commonwealth policy and upkeep of European relations.

Churchill stayed in India for 3 years and during this time he visited Mathura, Agra and Delhi (Seshan). Some others believe that he visited Vrindavan and bowed before the reigning deity, Sree Radha though the event was not publicized. He understood that she could grant divine gifts including the topmost political post of Britain. He secretly bowed to her that he would grant freedom to the country and present her some souvenirs, a promise he never fulfilled. He never came back and was busy publicizing his views on democracy, free trade, nuclear disarmament,

robotics and the sensible use of technology to emerge as a demi-god of wisdom and power. Nitin, in his podcast, talks about well researched work of Sushant Bharti that explores his relationship with the divine abode- Vrindavan. Churchill knew how Aurangzeb looted these temple towns and marveled at the glory of Hindu God Srinath ji before whom Aurangzeb had to accept blindness though he proclaimed to the whole world that the Hindu religion is beastly. He had an admiration for the Mughal ruler who amassed wealth by looting Hindus both had a disliking for.

KSS Seshan comments that Churchill found his love in India but lost it here. He refers to a lady named Pamela whom Churchill propose saying, “marry me, and I will conquer the world and lay it at your feet” (TheHindu). This failure to win his lady love despite his stature and intelligence might have fueled his hatred for India.

Commenting further on his illiberality, sectarianism and bigotry, he was a leader who talked about mass effects of war for a modern civilization. He considered war ‘a potent agent in the destinies and development of humanity’ (Arnn, 1424). At places he considered politics to be above war and war just a measure to protect peace. He wanted a non-violent Gandhi to die at the earliest. In his 1940 speech against Nazi Germany he said, “if the British commonwealth and its Empire last for a thousand years, men will still say that this was their finest hour.” He undermined terror as he demanded victory at all costs. A man talking of British principles ordered firing of 6 machine guns against thousands of dervishes in Sudan war. Narrating some secrets from Churchill war rooms in Whitehall where his cabinet met more than a hundred times, where women were employed for secret typing positions and where a hotline with US president Franklin Roosevelt was maintained, it is highly surprising that Churchill could watch films there to release pressure. Undoubtedly the pressure was to secure victory at all costs.

Churchill, who always dreamt of aristocracy, paved way for democracy and bureaucracy in another despotic attempt to shine as a master strategist. He believed that upkeep of the aristocracy has been the hard work of all civilizations.” And democracy is “association of all through the leadership of the best” (Arnn, Churchill’s Plan for Freedom).

Having done a basic survey of imperial justification of wars and the need to subdue other countries, it is imperative to look at the Just War Theory. Thucydides argued that war is extension of politics with hard-nosed state interest rather than lofty pretensions to moral behaviour. Imperial wars were not altogether for an extension of empire but were the results of private dreams and desires. Men like Churchill, who failed to gain power in a hierarchical aristocracy started worshipping democratic ideals to stay in power as elected among the commoners yet with ambitions of aristocrats. They devised methods for military victory at minimum expense and time and favoured the military necessity of machine guns and bombings. In an era of Hitlers, Stalins and Mussolinis, none cared to follow the rules of war and hold parties accountable after war for the destruction and losses suffered by the humanity. The proponents of ‘Jus Ad Bellum’ convention believe that wars once unleashed are beyond the control of leaders and generals, but

soldiers turned politicians know the value of commands of military generals, decisions taken in war rooms and the resolutions passed by convincing parliaments with a strong rhetoric. Churchill was one such leader. It is believed that justice like history is written by the victors. Winners enslave losers, impose political and religious frameworks to subdue and implement punitive measures against defiant (Moseley). Moseley further argues for Just war and quotes Locke's Second Treatises that defeated people should wait till the conquerors leave. The only reason behind this is that the governors and the policy makers do not have any rehabilitation plan or moral binding to amend the wrongdoings.

To conclude, it is argued that Winston Churchill was a great politician with strategic insight into global political affairs, but his decisions were backed by private ambition. He may have been opposed in the parliament several times but with his Nobel-winning dominion over words, use of rhetoric and ability to frame great commanding arguments, he could convince his opponents by powerful oratory, building self-defense for his actions even before those executions were made. His prolonged political career, his role during WWI, WWII and after, saw him as a stratagem of politics but he was a man blessed with some Muse to command people with word. His firsthand participation in Imperial wars, his aristocratic background, and his political acumen all favoured him in the journey to the position of PM of the strongest Empire. He achieved great fame at imperial wars as a soldier and in the literary arena by displaying his flamboyance as a writer, wisdom as a politician and strategy as a leader but his degradation for supporting wars for ambition, his dislike for the natives, his hatred and intolerance for the other religions of the world and his endeavour to be ranked topmost liberal among the illiberals like Hitler cannot be ruled out. He changed hearts with his rhetoric by leaving a corpus of work for the public to marvel at and hail him as a great leader of all times. A close in-depth analysis of his writings will unravel the charismatic layers of his personality. It is also argued here that his work should not be considered as suitable for historical analysis or as a truthful record of the wars. These are to be treated as literary outputs of a genius who was awarded a Nobel for his account of World War. A man with his kind of literary oeuvre cannot be dispossessed of his creativity by marking him as a political strategist and administrator, rather his writings be evaluated from a postcolonial and ecological perspective. It is pertinent to add here that his relationship with India in general and Mathura in particular needs to be explored for further analysis. Perhaps the world can take a dig at greater historical truths.

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