

## 'LESS INDIAN': EXPLORING THE IMAGE OF INDIA IN ANDREW SEAN GREER'S *LESS*

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### **Abstract:**

*Andrew Sean Greer, a twenty-first century American novelist and short story writer, claims his ingenuity as a writer by attempting every possible field of literature: fantasy, historical drama, comedy, novel and what not. Greer, the author of five novels as famous as *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* (2004) and *The Story of a Marriage* (2008), bagged the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for his latest fiction *Less* (2017), the first comic novel to win the prestigious award. By relating the gay and ageing author Arthur Less's eschewal of the known world to save himself from the pangs of his lover's betrayal, the novel becomes Greer's cornerstone in fighting his own gay identity and ageing. To avoid the wedding invitation from his lover Freddy, Arthur Less, the protagonist decides to encircle the globe and visits India in succession to New York City, Mexico, Turin, Berlin, Morocco. The paper investigates whether Less's 'passage to India' gifts him his emotional succour and provides him enough impetus to finish his novel. The paper seeks to interrogate if the image of India, as portrayed by Arthur's friend Carlos Pelu, parallels Less's portrayal of the same or goes astray. The paper also aims at exploring India, Indians and India's flora and fauna from an outsider's point of view, who remained a stranger in a land which preaches the motto of 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam'.*

**Keywords:** *Comic, gay, ageing, globe, passage to India, outsider, 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam'.*

Since the time of 'once upon a time', India, the great land of 'unity in diversity' serves to be the source of the westerners' imagination. The West in its continual attempts to come to terms with India, its inhabitants and its flora and fauna, has explored India. If sometimes, trade is the purpose, sometimes it is for travelling; the cause can simply be mercenary or artistic pleasure. "The East is a career"-argues Benjamin Disraeli. Andrew Sean Greer (b. 1970), the twenty-first century American novelist, in spite of being the child of two scientists, chooses literature as his career. The author of numerous short stories and six novels, as famous as *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* (2004), *The Story of a Marriage* (2008), *The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells* (2013), Greer bags the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for his latest fiction *Less* (2017).

A New York Times best seller and the winner of the Northern California Book Award, Greer's *Less* is a novel about a novelist, who is about to turn fifty. It attempts to portray India through the experiences of Greer's protagonist, Arthur Less gathers in India. Edward Said in his book *Covering Islam* (1981) argues, "All knowledge that is about human society...rests upon judgment and interpretation...interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is..." (Said 154). Greer's hero Arthur Less is a minor author, who to quote the novelist, "never sits next to anyone on a plane who has heard of his books" (Greer 07). Less, who considers himself to be "the first homosexual ever to grow old", for, "he has never seen another gay man age past fifty...He met them all at forty or so but never saw them make it much beyond; they died of AIDS, that generation" (Greer 34). An openly gay man, Arthur is frank enough to talk about his lovers and failed affairs. His first lover, the Pulitzer prize winning poet Robert Brownburn becomes the source of his creative inspiration and his debut novel, *Kalipso*, which retells the Calypso myth from *The Odyssey*, engenders Less's restoration by Robert. After losing the first phase of youth with Robert, Less decided not to lose himself with someone else: "He swore he would not give to anyone; he would enjoy it. He would enjoy it alone. But how to live alone and yet not be alone?"

(Greer 08). This problem was solved by his “one-time rival”, Carlos Pelu, whom he calls “one of my oldest friends”. Carlos Pelu becomes in time a rich propertied man with the real estate left by his lover and has holdings in Vietnam, Thailand and India. Carlos's adopted son Federico alias Freddy becomes a long time paramour of Arthur and the present cause of Arthur's heartbreak:

“They went on in this way for nine years. And then, one autumn day, it ended. Freddy had changed...Freddy announced that he was seeing someone who wanted him to be monogamous. He had promised to be, about a month earlier. And he thought it was about time he stayed true to his promise” (Greer 15).

And to be 'monogamous' officially, Freddy bids goodbye to Less and in consequence, Less receives “the wedding invitation in the mail: Request your presence at the marriage of Federico Pelu and Thomas Dennis” (Greer 17). And it is to avoid this invitation that Less eschews his known world and encircles the globe:

First: this interview with H. H. H. Mandern. This gets him plane fare to New York City....

Second: a conference in Mexico City.

Third: Turin... for a prestigioso award for a book recently translated into Italian.

Fourth: the Wintersitzung at the Liberated University of Berlina five-week course “on a subject of Mr. Less's choosing.”

Fifth: a sojourn across Morocco

Sixth: to India.

And, finally: to Japan. (Greer 19-20)

The narrator of the novel calls Arthur's plan to visit India, “this peculiar idea”. If this peculiarity is about the person, who has invited Arthur to visit India, i.e., Carlos Pelu, or is about the place itself, is not clear. Arthur hopes that in India “perhaps he could rest at last; he could polish the final draft of his novel” (Greer 20). The present paper investigates whether Less's passage to India gifts him his emotional succour and provides him enough impetus to finish his novel. The paper seeks to interrogate if the image of India, as portrayed by Arthur's friend Carlos Pelu: “...beautiful place, on a hill above the Arabian Sea; it would be a wonderful place for you to write” (Greer 20), parallels Less's portrayal of the same or goes astray. The paper also aims at exploring India, Indians and India's flora and fauna from an outsider's point of view. The paper examines how India, traditionally portrayed as the land that preaches the motto of 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam', fails to assimilate the American, who remains a stranger in it. The paper also investigates whether this failure is the outcome of the wide cultural gap or just a ploy of another American (Carlos Pelu), who deliberately offers the protagonist, an image of India, “red in tooth and claw”. However, India remains a mystery to Arthur Less.

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, entitled 'Less Indian', Greer gives his portrait of India through his depiction of Thiruvananthapuram. The first image of the Indian fauna, as portrayed by the manager Rupali in her very first encounter with Arthur Less, is enough to horrify him:

“Here are the black ants; they are your neighbours. Nearby there is Elizabeth, the yellow rat snake....Do not be afraid of the mongoose. Do not encourage the stray dogs-they are not our pets. Do not open the windows, because small bats will want to visit you, and possible monkeys. And if you walk at night, stamp on the ground to scare off other animals” (Greer 199).

To flee the dreaded wedding of his paramour of nine years, Arthur goes round the globe and after Morocco, he visits India to stay in a writer's retreat on a hill above the Arabian Sea on the suggestion of his friend Carlos. But to his dismay, Thiruvananthapuram, “was nothing like he expected” (Greer 199). Less's loss of illusion about India can be traced back in V.S. Naipaul's portrait of India in the third chapter, 'The Colonial' of his fiction *An Area of Darkness* (1964): “Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. They also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the

river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover (Naipaul 01)". Naipaul's "national drama of defecation" sees new versions of representation in Greer's fiction: "a crumbling road alongside which trash was piled", "a beach beside a river turned out to be an accretion of a million plastic bags", "the endless series of shops, as if made from one continuous concrete barrier, painted at intervals with different signs advertising chickens and medicine, coffins and telephones, pet fish and cigarettes, hot tea and 'homely' food, Communism, mattresses, handicrafts, Chinese food, haircuts and dumbbells and gold", "temples appearing at regular intervals like the colourful, elaborately frosted, but basically inedible sheet cake" (Greer 199). The arrested development of the city and the squalor led the narrator to opine: "Nothing, nothing here, is what he expected" (Greer 200). The writer's retreat centre, which in the words of Carlos was "a beautiful place, on a hill above the Arabian sea", turns out to be a all brick pentagonal cottage much like a nautilus shell. Confronting this dismal living condition, Arthur is confused if he "missed a crucial piece of information, or whether it was delicately withheld by Carlos Pelu" (Greer 201). However, he can manage with these conditions, but "peace and quiet" are his pre-requisites for finishing his artistic work. But his cottage proves to be the centre of all the din and bustle, made by various religions, which he terms, "the spiritual battle of the bands" (Greer 202). His morning starts with the Muslims' announcements of the morning call to prayer and it comes to a whole with the Muslims' evening prayer, and in between, "the faiths alternate": the local Christians' cranking up of hymns, the Hindus' kazoo-like refrain, the Christians' bells, sermon chantings, drums and so on. What is most frustrating for the writer protagonist is that "every morning, it starts again" (Greer 202). Finally, the nocturnal party of the local Christians compelled Less to think of checking into a local hotel. But the blue suit episode comes to disrupt all his ideas about leaving the retreat centre. The blue suit, which he tore in Morocco grabbed all his attention after being disgusted with the idea of starting his literary task amidst this chaotic atmosphere. As he has lost his sewing needle, Less visits the tailor to mend the suit. A grave tragedy follows suit: "...a brand-new horror in the moonlight: the black and white dog trotting toward Less's cottage, carrying in its mouth a long piece of medium blue fabric" (Greer 210). This fabric, Less recognizes, is from his favourite attire. "He makes his way down toward the dog, and the lights go out again...so Less can only feel his way into his own cottage, cursing, carelessly stepping barefoot across the tiles, and that is when he finds his sewing needle" (Greer 210). He ends up with "a fractured ankle and buried deep in the pad of his foot, one half of a needle" (Greer 212). With a temporary splint in his foot, Less is hospitalized and it is on this occasion that Rupali has called his friend Carlos to take care of him. And with the arrival of Carlos, Less faces the greater part of tragedy in India.

Carlos is the father of Less's paramour Freddy. Carlos is the man whose words, "Arthur, you know my son was never right for you", reverberates in Arthur's consciousness throughout the text. Carlos, "the majestically, powerfully, Pantagruelianally fat...colossus" never misses an opportunity to pinch Arthur and his gay sexuality and names him "Casanova of the Sahara" (Greer 216). During their first conversation in the car, Carlos asked Arthur two questions: "...you still have your letters from Robert?" and "...have you heard from Freddy?" (Greer 217)-these two seemingly unprobing questions about Arthur's relationship status are actually "illusion, *maya*, chimera, and that Carlos's real purpose was otherwise" (Greer 218). To his dismay, Arthur realized, after the departure of Carlos, that he has been imprisoned in the Raja Suit of Carlos's resort and now he misses all that he despises in his previous stay: "How Less misses the mongoose. He misses Rupali and the picknickers, the battle of the bands, the pastor and the tailor and Elizabeth the yellow snake; he even misses Jesus Christ Our Savior" (Greer 218). Caged in the elegant and well staffed, yet stiflingly dull room of the resort, Arthur Less finds out the perfect situation of boredom, necessary for his creative writing. Using the ploy of an "exceptional outing...a half an hour boat ride" (Greer 220), Carlos imprisons Arthur Less in a deserted island: "It is unmistakably paradise until Less turns around to see the boat departing. Castaway. Is it possible this is some final plot of Carlos's?" (Greer 220) Laughing at his own "New Yorker cartoon fate" (Greer 220), Less clamours to the setting Sun: "He gave up Freddy! He gave him up willingly; he even stayed away from the wedding. He has suffered enough, all on

his own; he is crippled, uniplegic, forsaken, and bereft of his magic suit. He has nothing left to take away, our gay Job. He drops to his knees in the sand” (Greer 221). Carlos wants to take from Arthur all his correspondence about the Russian River School, mainly about Robert, Ross and Franklin. Being caught between two pillows in a sequestered island, Less makes out Carlos's plan, Carlos wants to “...take his pride, to take his health and his sanity, to take Freddy, and now, at last, to take even his memories, his souvenirs, away. There will be nothing left of Arthur Less” (Greer 222). In exchange of money, Carlos wants to buy each and every possession of Arthur: Robert's personal letters to Arthur, Robert's love poems about Less, Woodhouse's painting to make a collection, “the Carlos Pelu Collection” for a university. Carlos openly acknowledges that he never hated Arthur, but envied him.

Carlos's theorization of human being's life needs mention. He, while mapping human sufferings, becomes the mouthpiece of the novelist: It's that our lives are half comedy and half tragedy. And for some people, it just works out that the first entire half of their lives is tragedy and then the second half is comedy...(Greer 223).” Carlos brands himself in the first category: “A poor kid come to the big city...I was such an angry young man-I had so much to prove; now there's money and laughter. It's wonderful” (Greer 224). After struggling to find his own space in the society, he is now enjoying his comic half of life. Carlos categorizes Arthur in the second group: “You had comedy in your youth. You were the ridiculous one then, the one everyone laughed at...Arthur, the first half of your life was comedy. But you're deep into the tragic half now” (Greer 224). It is Carlos, who has put Arthur into this tragic situation. It is Carlos, who has snatched Arthur's nine years love and again, it is him, who tries to snatch away every personal possession of Arthur by subjecting him in this adversity. Carlos envies the innocence and naivety of Arthur and wanted throughout his life to ruin it: “...You were different. I think everybody wanted to touch that innocence, may be ruin it. Your way of going through the world, unaware of danger. Clumsy and naïve. Of course, I envied you. Because I could never be that...” (Greer 224). And it is this innocence of Arthur, which renders Carlos rejecting his plot of taking away Arthur's possessions: “Arthur, I changed my mind. You have the luck of a comedian...your whole life is a comedy. Not just the first part. The whole thing” (Greer 226). Carlos is defeated by Arthur's inherent innocence. He acknowledges: “...You've misunderstood and misspoken and tripped over absolutely everything and everyone in your path, and you've won” (Greer 226). But for Arthur, this victory has no special significance and he wonders “what it is he is meant to have won” (Greer 226). Now, the sole remaining question is, if Arthur Less remains “less” Indian or he incorporates its values. While answering this question, one must be remindful of Arthur's observation on meeting an elephant. The “age-spotted” elephant, “with its small unfathomable eyes” (Greer 216) stares at Arthur, as if to say: “I'm not so strange as you” (Greer 216). One cannot but refer to the cover story of the seven-year old boy in the airport lounge. As he concludes, the boy cannot comprehend the blue gaze of Less, “They are the eyes of a castaway”. India fails to embrace Less with all his shortcomings and he remains a 'castaway' in India. But after his life-long search, he finds out that there are more important things than love. He has searched his whole life for pure love and almost wasted his life for it. His recurring dream of a priest at the top of a cave, telling him about the more important things than love, has now come true in India. In Indian mysticism, Arthur ultimately succeeds in finding out “what could be more important than love” (Greer 211). And the answer is his artistic creation, his novel.

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