

MAHATMA IN INDIAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy has greatly influenced 20th century Indian literature. Several important literary works of that period illustrate how Mahatma and his ideology impacted Indian writing in English in India. He was an immense source of writing himself and has influenced different disciplines and many writers from different fields like history, politics, philosophy, literature, sociology and writers considered to have him as their central theme. This article focuses on his role in Indian novels of that era. Here I have made a modest attempt to re-invent the Mahatma in the light of the Indian English Literature.

Keywords: Gandhism, influence, idealism, intellectual

Introduction

When we look at the history of the early 20th century, we find Gandhi's shadow in almost all aspects of late colonial India. Gandhi gave new strength and confidence to Indian languages that had suffered contempt, neglect, indifference and disgrace for a long time. Gandhi insisted on high thinking and simple living which was reflected and highlighted by the literary English authors of that time, who in their novels and short stories, portrayed the real picture of the the-then society from various sides, thereby presenting the influence of Gandhi on Indian villages and towns, letting us a scope to probe how Gandhi's ways of developmental communication created effects on human lives bringing a sea change in their thoughts, views and living. Almost all of their novels represent events, which distinctly

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correspond to the examples of actual incidents, and teachings that Gandhi in real life encoded during his visits to various places. The writers working in different languages in those days were either people who had directly come under Gandhi's influence, many of them had even taken part in the freedom movements, or they were highly influenced by his ideals. Their writings were immensely burdened with Gandhian idealism, lifestyle, his teachings, and anti-colonial stands. Gandhi was so much part and form of any literary genre of that period that he made appearance in many dramas, novels, stories and in most of the cases, the Gandhian writers, especially the novelists and short story writers, made Babu an important, guest character or they made a local Gandhi replica and presented him in the light of the Mahatma. The different phases of the nationalist struggle and even the different phases of our engagement with colonial modernity, have been defined with the definite role played by Gandhi in one way or the other and there are very significant examples that can be seen in the novelistic output. The inspiration and influence which our literatures of all languages have imbibed from him is well noted in the theatre, folk activities and literary writings based on his life, preaching, and ideologies and of course, his welfare activities nationwide. Such a medium produced an immediate feedback from the audience from all parts of the country, as things got well assimilated into their hearts and minds, and the whole of India, united, could respond to his call. Gandhi was represented as a political sage by the Indian National Congress in its political campaigns, policy-wise and his accessories, especially the loin cloth, his stick and very nominal lifestyle were modes that themselves spoke for the Mahatma and helped in establishing him as a saintly preacher and a sincere freedom worker. This worked havoc in the Indian minds especially in the village folk, who were basically religion-bound and not at all conscious about the then political and economic domination of the country.

Bhabani Bhattacharya specifically sums up the elements that the then writers incorporated from Gandhi:

“In every Indian literature a new thinking emerged. There was to be shift of emphasis from the rich to the poor, from the intellectual to the man of character and inner culture, from the educated to the illiterate and the voiceless, and deep rooted in these revaluations was social reform” (Bhattacharya 1969: 226).

Krishna Kripalani puts it in this way:

“Apart from its political repercussions, it was both moral and intellectual and at once inhibitive and liberating... Gandhi stripped urban

life and elegance of their pretension and emphasized that religion without compassion and culture without conscience was worthless. He transfigured the image of India as she was poor, starving and helpless, but with an untapped potential of unlimited possibilities” (Kriplani 1972: 79).

Gandhi was so much a part and form of any literary genre of that period that he made appearance in many dramas, novels, and stories and in poems too. The great Indian trio — R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao — and many other writers explored Gandhi’s thoughts in their writings. Gandhian philosophy includes truth, non-violence, Satyagraha, simplicity, love, brotherhood, etc. All these were very well established by R.K. Narayan in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* and Raja Rao in *Kanthapura*. All the characters of these novels are rooted and flourished in Indian ethics and Indian philosophy. They start their journey in the search of truth and way of life. Sometimes these characters fail as they have not followed Gandhism but if they succeeded, it is all because of following Gandhism.

In many other novels of the 1930s and 1940s, we find the depiction of Gandhian style agitations and Congress rallies and whenever the nation is being invoked, whenever the anti-colonial struggles are being invoked, we find a very compelling reference to the Indian National Congress and its leaders, particularly Gandhi. And one of the earliest historians, M.K. Naik, refers to this as Gandhian whirlwind. This brings us to ask a question which is already been asked by Snehal Shinghavi in the essay *The Mahatma as Proof: The Nationalist Origins of the Historiography of Indian Writing in English*. She asked this very compelling question:

“What makes a text Gandhian and how much Gandhi does one need before a novel becomes a mouthpiece of Gandhian politics?” (Shinghavi 2013: 29)

This question definitely does not have a proper designated answer.

If we survey through literary histories and particular writings about the Gandhian phase, the Gandhian novels and Mahatma’s impact on the early Indian fiction, we also realize that there is absence of a proper critical engagement to find out how Gandhian these works are and what elements particularly make these texts Gandhian and there is a reason and rationale for this that one could find in the historical and critical tradition.

This article is an attempt to try and unpack these various elements which went into the making of what now we understand as Gandhian

novels. If we go through the trajectory of the emergence of the novel particularly as it has been written in the later years, when the history of Indian writing in English generally began to emerge, there was a national consensus about the 1930s right from the beginning, when the Indian English novel began to deserve an academic and critical attention. One could easily say that this was somewhere around the 1970s and Meenakshi Mukherjee played an important part in foregrounding the studies on Indian fiction in English.

There was so much a national consensus about the role played by the 1930s, that the 1930s can be seen as the beginning, as the origin, as the earliest phase of Indian English fiction. It was also considered as the decade when the Indian English novel came into its own form and the kind of icons which were produced before that, (before the decade of 1930s), they have always been seen as prototypes or just narratives and the plot structure was not found strong enough to be considered as a proper kind of novel. The other consensus was that the novels which were produced in the 1930s, they all had a very predominant concern related to nationalism and this was also presented in stark contrast against the personal and limited view of the earlier literary works and narratives.

The idea of nationalism emerged as the single most important concern and this nationalism was of a peculiar kind, which had the imprint and influence of Gandhi. There were of course criticisms as well as positive reinforcement about the same as it was believed that this was meant for European readership primarily.

We find some of the earlier writings particularly from Srinivasa Iyengar and also from the other early novelists where they talk about the need for some kind of a sympathetic approach from the European readers and from the European critics. The trio Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, were seen as the most important figures of that period. There were also writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, G.V. Desani and others who wrote in that era but later did not occupy the centre stage for one reason or the other.

And when we consider this consensus, it is also important to understand that the 1930s was seen as the period which witnessed a flowering of Indian English fiction and this was also seen in harsh contrast with the writings available in regional languages. It is also important to have a critical approach towards them to try and understand how certain things were fashioned in one particular way or the other. The excerpt from Jussawalla's writings on Indian writing in English tell us particularly the significance of the fiction in the 1930s and how it has generally been presented in the critical

tradition and also in the historiographical tradition of Indian writing in English:

“It is no mere coincidence that there came a sudden flowering of Indian fiction in English in the 1930s, a period during which the star of Gandhiji attained its meridian on the Indian horizon” (Jussawalla & Dasenbrock 1992: 19).

The ‘*Three Musketeers*’ of Indian fiction in English — Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan — started writing during the 1930s and their novels demonstrated the Gandhian impact convincingly. So this is how the 1930s have been positioned and presented and situated in historiographical tradition of Indian writing in English. There is a sudden flowering which has been acknowledged. And the central theme of these entire set of writings and narratives, seems to be located in the figure of Gandhi. Gandhi gave a new kind of initiative and leadership to this generation-old struggle for Independence. This figuration of Gandhi deserves special attention and needs to be critically enquired into. We do find a continuation of this consensus in the tradition of history writing and also in the tradition of critical writings. Any study on the novels of the 1930s and 1940s would also tell us that they always allied to a variant of Indian National Congress politics and the agendas of its leaders particularly focusing on Gandhi and then we find this sort of consensus being continually built into this tradition of historiography and criticism.

The combination of Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao, writing nationalist fiction, focus Gandhi as the central figure. This was seen by Srinivasa Iyengar as rise of Indian writing in English by a set of people who initiated the radical break from the old Macaulayan amplitude and they were also seen as the makers of a new kind of English, an Indian English prose about which Iyengar, Narasimhaiah and Naik have written extensively.

Anand, Narayan and Rao define Gandhi emerging as a character or as a clear theme. R.K. Narayan is the master in fusing reality with fantasy. He mingles his personal philosophy and views in his literary work successfully. He was deeply influenced by Gandhism. His treatment of Gandhian thought in his fiction is different. His work highlights the multifarious facets of Gandhism. His characters are Gandhian in their own particular ways. His novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* has reflection of Gandhian philosophy in great amount. It was written in 1955, after the seven years of Gandhi’s assassination. Sriram is the protagonist of the novel who propagates Gandhian views and advocates the Gandhian philosophy as a way of life. This

novel places Gandhi at the centre of the text. It shows the process of transformation in Sriram in his search for truth and self-realization. He is portrayed as a careless boy in the beginning of the novel who lives with his grandmother in Malgudi. His life gets its meaning when he first sees Bharti, disciple of Gandhi. He falls in love with her and goes to attend Gandhian camp in order to meet her. But once he finds an entry in the camp, his primary motive, which was to spend time with Bharti, transforms into a new relationship. K.R.S. Iyengar notices:

“In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the theme is apparently Bharti and Shriram’s romance which, however, gains a new dimension in the background of their common allegiance to Mahatma” (Iyengar 2005: 372).

When he hears Gandhi’s speech, he feels the need to change his lifestyle. His meeting with Gandhiji first time gives him a clear way to work, which was missing in his life. He stays in the camp and shares room with another disciple of Gandhi, Gopad. Gopad adds new dimensions to his knowledge and tells him the aims and object of the Gandhian spirit. He visits famine-affected area and helps people. His passion for Gandhi and his philosophy is noticed by his grandmother. She asks, “Oh! He is your god, is he?” On this Sriram replies, “Yes he is, and I won’t hear any speak lightly of him... he is not a man; he is a Mahatma”. (Narayan 2007: 83)

When he sees Mahatma’s love for the underdogs and the untouchables of Malgudi, he also renounces the luxurious lifestyle and prefers to stay with Harijans during his visits for campaigns. He completely follows the steps of Gandhi and becomes the true representative of his thoughts and philosophy. He participates in “Quit India”, “Satyagraha”, and “Swadeshi” movements with great passion and commitment. He comes in contact with Jagdish, who is the representative of the class of revolutionaries. Jagdish believes in violence that is opposite to the non-violence of Gandhi. Sriram comes in his contact and starts assisting him in his extremist activities. But soon he realizes that by destroying things and following non-violence they cannot throw the British rule from India. He feels that Gandhi’s non-violent weapon was superior to the violent weapon. His Gandhism fails after an initial fervour and zeal. He could not fulfil the daring demands at the next stage. He gets arrested and it is in the prison that he gets the opportunity to listen to his inner voice after receiving a letter from Mahatma.

“Your work should be a matter of inner faith. It cannot depend upon what you see or understand. Your conscience should be your guide in every action. Consult it and you won’t go wrong. Don’t guide yourself by what you see. You should do your duty because your inner voice drives you to do it” (Narayan 2007: 127-128)

Finally, he is freed from the prison as India gains freedom. He and Bharti decide to get married and their marriage is only possible with the blessings of Mahatma. Both of them are waiting for Mahatma at the Birla Mandir in New Delhi but they receive the news that a young man has shot Gandhi dead.

Mulk Raj Anand’s works reveal prominently the deep influence of Gandhian ideology. He has emphasized more and more on social problems of poor, oppressed, downtrodden low caste of the Hindu society and their inhuman exploitation. His novel, *Untouchable*, published in 1935, covers the time of pre-Independence era when poverty, casteism, superstition and exploitation of untouchables were predominated. Anand has also taken the theme of inhuman exploitation of the lower class by the higher section of the society. This novel describes a single day in the life of the protagonist, Bakha, who belongs to the sweeper class. He is exploited by everyone on the account of his lower caste. The people of his caste are not allowed to enter temples and other public places. If they touch anything then that thing gets polluted. They have to stop or change their direction if someone from high class is coming or going from the same way. A high caste Hindu slaps Bakha just because he accidentally touches him. He becomes violent when his sister tells him that the priest tried to molest her. But his sister stops him because she knows very well that nobody is going to listen to them. Bakha feels helpless and disgusting by the behaviour of people towards the lower class. He gets peace of mind when he hears Gandhi talking about the welfare of untouchables. His speech gives him a hope for the better future. In his speech, Gandhi says:

“As you all know, while we are asking for freedom from the grip of a foreign nation, we have ourselves, for centuries, trampled underfoot millions of human beings without feeling the slightest remorse of our iniquity. For me the question of these people is moral and religious....” (Anand 2002: 136)

Innocent Bakha did not understand these words in the beginning and got confused. But soon he got the meaning when Gandhi says: “I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism.” (Anand 2002: 137)

He feels that at least someone is there for him and his class. He gets fully influenced by Gandhi when he hears him saying:

“... Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow...”
(Anand 2002: 140)

But soon all his hopes are seemed broken when N.N. Bashir, a Barrister-in-law criticizes Gandhi and his philosophy. He calls Gandhi humbug. But Bashir, a young poet who edits Nawan Jung comes forward favoring Gandhian philosophy. He says:

“He has his limitations but he is fundamentally sound. He may be wrong in wanting to shut India off from the rest of the world by preaching the revival of the spinning-wheel, because, as things are, that can’t be done. But even in that regards he is right. For it is not India’s fault that it is poor: it is the world’s fault that the world is rich! ...” (Anand 2002: 142)

He tells Bakha about the invention of flush system. It gives a ray of hope to the disappointed and helpless Bakha and people of his community. He explains the importance and use of this flush system that with the help of this “sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and careless society”. (Anand 2002: 146)

The novel ends with the hope of a better life for the untouchables.

Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* was published in 1938. It deals with the Gandhian impact on a small village called Kanthapura, a small village of South India. The novel begins with the description of the village by a woman Achakka. Rao uses the oral story-telling method to steep in Indian history in order to relate the past and the impact of change. Achakka highlights the importance of the deities, especially Kenchamma, which shows the importance of tradition and culture and at the same time welcoming the change. Kanthapura is a traditional caste ridden village which is far away from all modern ways of living and development taking place in the cities. It is believed that the village is protected by the blessings of the deity Kenchamma. Moorthy is the protagonist of the novel who is a Brahmin. He discovers a half-buried *linga* from the village and installs it. He goes to the city where he gets familiar with Gandhian philosophy. He follows Gandhi in high spirit. He wears *khadi* clothes and fights against untouchability. After his mother passes away, he starts living with an educated widow Rangamma, who takes part in Indian’s struggle for freedom. His belief in Gandhian philosophy can be seen when Bade Khan hits him. He does not react on it and follows

the principal of non-violence. He continues his fight against injustice and inequality by following Gandhism. He leads the villagers as the representative of Gandhian philosophy. He gets arrested because of his participation and when Rangamma tries to release him on bail he refuses. While he is in prison, the women of Kanthapura take the charge of the struggle for freedom. Rangamma, as a true Gandhian, is not only courageous but also becomes an inspiration for other women. She tells the village women about Rani Lakshmi Bai, Rajput princess, Sarojini Naidu, etc. and encourages them to follow the principles of 'truth' 'non-violence, 'Swadeshi' etc. The people begin to have strong faith in Gandhian movement in Kanthapura. Gandhi is not presented as a person anywhere, but he lives in the hearts of the villagers. His speeches and teachings are the words of God for them. Moorthy comes out as a Mahatma for this small village as Mahatma Gandhi for the whole nation. He becomes the symbol of change. People of Kanthapura are filled with the spirit of Satyagraha and want to take part in Dandi March. But Gandhi gets arrested by the British government and all the responsibilities of the movement fall upon the local leaders. Moorthy plans to start a non-cooperation movement in the village. But soon the village becomes men less because of taking part in the Satyagraha movement. Moorthy gets more influenced by the principles of Nehru at the end of the novel.

R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao are three leading figures of early Indian English literature. The three above-mentioned novels are best for analysing how Gandhian philosophy influenced Indian writing in English. Gandhi's aim was to eliminate poverty, casteism, untouchability and superstitions which were prominent at that time along with India's freedom struggle.

He believed that political freedom without a healthy social base is waste. *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura* follow Gandhian ideology and his principles of non-violence, truth, brotherhood, Satyagraha and his views on untouchability. *Waiting for the Mahatma* portrays Gandhi as a great leader who is deeply connected with the problems of ordinary people. In *Untouchable* his views give a hope for a good life for the downtrodden. At the same time, *Kanthapura* shows influence of Gandhi's struggle for India's Independence and its impact on the people of a small village.

The flowering of this novel in the 1930s can be attributed to the figure of Gandhi, as he was at the centre and the same is noticed in the writings of M.K. Naik in his history of literature. He writes:

“Up to the 1930's there was no Indian novelist who could claim sustained and considerable achievement in fiction originally written in English.

Then came a sudden flowering, and it is significant that it came in the 1930's – a period during which the glory that was Gandhi's attained perhaps its brighter splendor. The Indian freedom struggle was already more than a generation old yet with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi it was so thoroughly democratized that freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grass-roots of Indian society and revitalized it. It is possible to see a connection between this development and the rise of the Indian novel in English for fiction of all literary forms most vitally concerned with social conditions and values" (Naik 1982: 194).

Here notice the way in which the term Indian gets used repetitively, though the nation was not yet formed. In the 1930s, we find that a sense of Indianness was already dominating this entire field. We also notice that the idea of the Indian English fiction being more Indian than the others, being more nationalist than the others and being a part of Gandhi's project towards the taming Independence.

Srinivasa Iyengar also positions Gandhi in very significant ways while he is tracing the emergence of Indian English. According to him Indian writing and speaking in English since the Gandhian revolution had undergone a radical change and positioning Gandhi as a major milestone and positioning Gandhi as a major literary event in this discussion is very significant. In 1967, Narasimhaiah also shares this opinion which by then became almost contested as well. In Narasimhaiah's words, it was he; he is Gandhi:

"It was he that broke the cumbrous Victorian periods which had enslaved the Indian writer like his counterpart in England" (Narasimhaiah 1974: x)

So Gandhi becomes not just a political figure, Gandhi becomes not just one of the leaders of Indian National Congress, who led the nation into independence, but he also emerges as this important figure who rescued the language from its colonial enslavement. He also becomes this figure who brought about certain kind of revolution in the central themes and narratives of Indian writing in English.

To sum up, it is possible to say that Indian writing in English in 1930s became equated to Indian nationalist writing in English. So it was not just enough to write in English, but one also had to write in English with the kind of themes which are expected within the frameworks of nationalist concerns. And this nationalism obviously had to be linked with the towering figure of Mahatma. We find this equation being very comfortably played out in most of the literary histories and critical writings about Indian writing in English and

there is an uncritical way in which the 1930s and 1940s are seen as the phase of Gandhian novels and this had also led to the exclusion of range of writers like Venkataramani, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nagarajan, Ghose, G. V. Desani, Khushwant Singh, Ahmed Ali, etc. They also experimented and wrote extensively in Indian English pretty much in the same way like Rao, Narayan or Anand did around the same period they were also successful novelists. But we do not find them occupying the center stage in the discussions on 1930s and 1940s because the Indian writing in English in the 1930s and 1940s was narrowed down to fit in Indian nationalist writing in English focusing on the figure of the Mahatma.

This is not to say that Gandhi was entirely absent in the later novels, but the figure of Gandhi which made a comeback in the later novels was entirely different. It was not in the same way as Gandhi was present in the works written during the 1930s and 1940s because that was also the phase of the height in nationalism, if you look at some of the later novels especially of Nayanthara Sahgal. She published *A Time to be Happy* in 1958 which was narrated by an unnamed Gandhian worker. In this work we find that Gandhi is being used as the touchstone against which the idea of Indian is defined. So there is an ideal way in which Gandhi continues to be projected even in the later 1950s.

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