

# **Representation of Gandhian Consciousness in Indian English Fiction with Special Reference to Select Novels of R. K. Narayan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper seeks to examine the representation of the Gandhian Ideals and principles and how Gandhi has been presented as an icon in select novels of R.K. Narayan (1906-2001). For the purpose of this paper I have decided to incorporate three novels namely *The English Teacher* (1945), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). The novelists particularly of the 1930s and 1940s owed their inspiration and the conditions of their emergence to two contexts- the social and political upheavals of the ‘Gandhian whirlwind’ and the era of the late modernism in Europe. The novels laid in the nineteen-thirties and ‘forties invariably touch upon the national movement for political independence.

R. K. Narayan delineates a critique of Gandhian principles in his novel *The Vendor of Sweets* where Mali, the son of a Gandhian sweet vendor, travels to America to pursue a course in creative writing, demonstrating the East-West encounter theme operating as the conflict between pre-industrial modes of life and mechanizations. In the novel *The English Teacher* Narayan presents the Gandhian views on education through the portrayal of the protagonist Krishna. Gandhi in his essay on ‘Satyagraha’ opines that renunciation of selfish motives, passion and emotional bondage which according to the latter has been an Indian ideal of life. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi presented a critique of modern civilization. In the novel *The Guide* Narayan narrates the journey of Raju from a tourist guide to become a saint. The paper further intends to explore how Gandhian ideas on ‘Satyagraha’ and his views on modern civilization (*Hind Swaraj*), condition of women and colonial education system that form the crux of these novels. The protagonists of these novels were rooted and flourished in the Indian ethics and Indian philosophy. Gandhi is a ‘recurring presence’ in these novels but he has been treated variously as “an idea, a symbol, a tangible reality, and a benevolent human being”.

**Keywords:** R.K. Narayan, Gandhi, Satyagraha, modern civilization, Patriarchy

## Introduction

The novelists of the 1930s and 1940s owed their inspiration and the conditions of their emergence to two contexts- the social and political upheavals of the 'Gandhian whirlwind' and the era of the late modernism in Europe. The novels laid in the nineteen-thirties and 'forties invariably touch upon the national movement for political independence. This is inevitable because the long years of struggle and sacrifice have shaped and coloured every experience of modern India. M.K. Naik an eminent critic regarded this period as the 'Gandhian Whirlwind' and further states:

The Gandhian whirlwind began to sweep over the length and breadth of the land, upsetting all established political strategies and ushering in refreshingly new ideas and methods which shook Indian life in several spheres to the core. (Naik 114)

A sense of national experience has surely helped in maturing the novel form, because an experience shared by the people at large becomes the matrix of a society and the novel flourishes best in a society that is integrated. The independence movement in India was not merely a political struggle, but an all-pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. No Indian writer, writing in those decades or writing about them, could avoid reflecting this upsurge in their works. The most recurrent technique in Indian English fiction has been that of the first person narrative. Moreover, a large number of these novels are autobiographical in method, if not in substance. Another significant quality is the conscious use of myth for enhancing the effect of a contemporary situation which is a kind of device that the Indian novelist has emulated from the West but has naturalized it to the Indian soil. The most potent force behind the whole movement, the Mahatma is a recurring presence in these novels, and he is used in different ways to suit the design of each writer.

With the advent of Gandhi in the political scenario, there came about a revolution in the art and themes of the Indian English novels. The work of **K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya** would not perhaps have been possible had Gandhi not occurred during this period. In fact, it was during this period that Indian English Fiction discovered some of its most compelling themes: the ordeal of the freedom struggle, East-West encounter, and the predicament of the subaltern, the landless poor and the downtrodden. Gandhi has been treated variously as an idea, a myth, a symbol, a tangible reality, and a benevolent human being. In a few novels he appears in person, in most others his is an invisible presence. Gandhi's influence on literature generally and the anglophone novel more particularly is best understood in terms of the pivotal role he played in decisively bringing together diverse communities under the rubric of the 'India' possessed, according to him, of a civilizational and spiritual unity that long preceded 'English' rule.

Events such as Civil Disobedience Movement and Dandi March find their way into the numerous 'Mahatma novels' of this period written in English. An early example is the work of K. S. Venkatramani (1891-1951). His first novel, *Murugan, The Tiller* (1927) promotes the cause of Gandhian economics through its dramatization of a heavily allegorical relationship between two friends. His second novel, *Kandan, The Patriot* (1932) is about the 1930s Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhian movement was not simply a political movement but rather it was for the first time in Indian history that has generated and raised social issues and concerns. The ferment that Gandhian thought created encompassed the whole social milieu and touched on issues that affected man as a whole in various facets and stages of life. With the emergence of Gandhian influence in Indian English novels there has been a marked shift of emphasis from the city to the village that implied a contrast between urban luxury and sophistication on the one hand and rural modes and manners on the other. In this intellectual ferment, cultural self expression, infused largely with incipient national feeling, writing in these decades highlights a thoroughgoing critique of tradition, radical breaks from select portions of the past, an extensive intellectual and artistic interrogation of science and technology, rationality, religious faith and the representation of everyday life in contemporary home, family, village, town and city.

Although deeply steeped in ancient Indian tradition, Gandhian thought can yet be said to be radical and revolutionary. He denounced the utilitarian principle of the greatest good of the greatest number, a principle which had enjoyed the support of a number of philosophers and he gave to us his 'Sarvodaya' philosophy. He challenged the fundamental basis of western civilization and firmly believed in the supremacy of the matter over spirit. What distinguishes Gandhiji from the utilitarians and other revolutionary thinkers of the West is his emphasis on the spiritual aspect of life and his conviction that materialism will ultimately yield place to spiritualism in which alone lies the hope of the liberation of the individual and mankind. He attacked Western civilization, not because it was totally corrupt, but because it was contrary to the needs of India. He saw in Western values a craze for comfort, multiplication of wants, and self-indulgence. Such emphasis could only lead to greed, conflict, suppression of the weak by the strong and social disparity. *Swaraj* (independence) then, for him, did not simply mean achieving independence from Britain but also from the oppressive culture the British had created in India. In 1909 Gandhi wrote a critique of colonialism and Western civilization called *Hind Swaraj*. Perhaps the most valuable and enduring parts of this polemic relate to the theory and practice of non-violence. The most explosive passage in *Hind Swaraj*, however, related to the doctrine of Passive Resistance:

Passive Resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering: it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force...If I do not obey the law, and accept the penalty for

its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self. (*Indian Writing in English* 253)

No study of R.K. Narayan's works would be considered complete without an assessment of the role of Mahatma Gandhi in his fiction. The protagonists in his novels namely *The English Teacher*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Guide* truly reflect Gandhian consciousness or his vision. In the novel, Narayan illustrates the conflict between modern culture and traditional culture. The novel depicts the relationship between Jagan and his son Mali. Jagan is a sweet vendor who strictly practiced the principles of Gandhian philosophy. But his son, Mali rejects his father's beliefs and values and favours liberal western ideals. When the novel begins, Jagan is a fifty-five year old man, living a strict life of asceticism, a true Satyagrahi. In Chapter 1 of the novel Jagan remarks "Conquer taste and you will have conquered the self" (1). This statement echoes Gandhi views on Satyagraha which embodies soul force and demands control of the senses, simple living and devotion to truth, obedience to law. According to Gandhi:

*Satyagraha* is pure soul-force. Truth is the very substance of the soul. That is why this force is called Satyagraha. The soul is informed with knowledge. In it burns the flame of love. (Mukherjee 125)

Gandhiji described it as eternal. Socrates practiced it when he preferred to drink a cup of hemlock rather than giving up preaching what he knew to be truth. Prahlad was a Satyagrahi when he bore all the tortures he was subjected to by his father. Mirabai was a true Satyagrahi in bearing all the indignities heaped upon her rather than submit to what she considered was wrong. *Satyagraha* was also preached and practiced by Lord Buddha and by Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be found in the writings of modern thinkers like Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau who greatly influenced Gandhi. A Satyagrahi does not fear for his body, he does not give up what he thinks is truth. Another noteworthy feature of Gandhian influence on Narayan's writings prompted him to present a critique of modern civilization and provided an alternative to modern civilization. Gandhi was emphatic about the superiority of Indian civilization and its inherent ability to withstand the onslaughts of modernity. Gandhi's position has similarities with the romantic criticism of the moral and social depredations of advancing capitalism. Two major influences on Gandhi, in the formations of these ideas, were Edward Carpenter's *Civilizations: Its Cause and Cure* and John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. Gandhi liked especially Carpenter's argument that the ever-increasing powers of production engendered by modern science and technology alienated man from nature, from his true self and his fellows and it worked in every way to disintegrate and corrupt men. In all his major writings Narayan explored these themes again and again and adhered to the Gandhian viewpoint. Gandhi did not share his confidence in reason and science. He asserted that the scientific mode of knowledge was applicable only to very limited areas of human living. The assumption that rationality and science could provide solutions to all problems led to insanity and

impotence. “Mere intellect” Gandhi wrote makes one insane or unmanly. The reasoning faculty will raise a thousand issues. Only one thing will save us from these and that is faith. Thus Gandhi not only made a critique of modern civilization, civil society and its various institutions; the intellectual developments associated with modern civilization, reason, science, history, the dominant themes of post-enlightenment thought met with his utter and complete disapproval and rejection.

R. K. Narayan’s *The Guide* is set in a period that can be seen as a transition between the pre-colonial rural India and the India that is on its way towards western modernity after British imperialism. The intrusion of new ideas brought about by the various aspects of western modernity like the advent of the railways caused changes in the landscape of the place. The Railway which comes to Raju’s hometown Malgudi when he is still a child represents the advent of modernization and industrialization. The Railways not just connect Malgudi to the outside world but the corrupt practices from the urban life also made its entry along with development. The coming of the railways has been narrated in this way:

One fine day, beyond the tamarind tree, the station building was ready. The steel tracks gleamed in the sun; the signal posts stood with their red and green stripes and their colourful lamps; and our world was neatly divided into this side of the railway line and that side. (*The Guide* 37)

The alternative to modern civilization that Gandhi posed had to be located outside the domain of civil society and the influences of modern civilization. Gandhi remarks:

Real civilization was to be found in the villages of India. The traditional village world, autonomous of modern civilization, was the complete opposite of the individualistic world of civil society. Life was governed by a communal morality where each member performed his duty. The hope of India lay in the peasantry. (Mukherjee xiv)

In his novel *The English Teacher* Narayan delineates the character called Krishnan who rebels against English educational system. The rejection of cultural dominance especially through the rejection of Western educational system is a recurrent theme in many of Narayan’s novels. He is presented a character who firmly believed that western education is the main source that leads to cultural alienation of an individual. In the beginning of the novel he expresses his disagreement with Mr. Brown, the Principal of Albert Mission College about the purity of English language and regards English teaching as literary garbage. Like Gandhi he stresses on the necessity of the mother tongue. He considers that faulty education is solely responsible for its inability to properly shape the minds of the young learners. At the end of the novel Krishnan ceases to be an English teacher and achieves freedom to experiment with Gandhian principles on

education. While discussing the futility of Western educational system for young Indian minds Krishnan comments:

My duty in the interval had been admonishing, cajoling and browbeating a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they might mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks and save me adverse remarks from my chiefs at the end of the year. For this pain the authorities kindly paid me a hundred rupees on the first day of every month and dubbed me a lecturer. (*The Malgudi Omnibus* 295)

Krishnan dislikes the colonial education system and advocates for a kind of system that has its foundation in the reinterpretation of ancient texts in the present context. He further says:

I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices. (Narayan 179)

Narayan was highly critical about the relevance of the Western education in a non-Western society. His novel *The Guide* also explains the theme of cultural conflict and mental enslavement of the colonized people and the resultant alienation of an individual from its roots. Raju's father refuses to send his son to Albert Mission School as because the Hindu Gods and their rituals were considered a source of laughter. Raju's father says:

I don't want to send my boy there; it seems they try to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our Gods. (*The Guide* 25)

Following Gandian ideals Narayan sees no conflict between individual freedom and social obligation. Gandhiji believed that there will hardly be any occasion for a clash between individual freedom and social obligation in a society based on non-violence and selfless devotion to the promotion of good for all and that is also the best means of realizing the true selves. By reconciling the claims of individual freedom to the requirement of social obligation Gandhiji solved the eternal problems of social and political obligation and thereby made a great contribution to social and political thought. In the novel *The Guide* Narayan traces the journey of the protagonist Raju who transforms himself from a sinner to a saint. The central theme of the novel is the transformation of Raju from his role as a tour guide to that of a spiritual guide. The character of Raju in *The Guide* is a series of improvisations. Raju never did anything; things always happened to him. He accepted the role of a spiritual guide because it gave him unconditional and free supply of food as the offerings made by the villagers was the only means by which he could satisfy his hunger and thus he embraced this role enthusiastically. Later Raju is called upon by the villagers to undergo an act of vicarious

suffering to purify the sins of others. During the early days of the fast, in desperate attempts to escape, Raju contemplates running away from the whole show. What keeps him back is not practical considerations or fear of being caught; but very surprisingly the faith of the people. As Raju remarks:

If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom, and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly? For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort; for the first time he was learning the thrill of full appreciation, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. (*The Guide* 238)

Gandhi's influence on Narayan is clearly evident in the transformation of Raju from a rogue or scoundrel to that of a saint. According to Gandhi service to others is impossible for someone who is not inspired by the spirit of sacrifice. Gandhiji like Buddha attached the miseries of life to the manipulation of wants. Gandhiji was perfectly right in maintaining that for society to be organized on the basis of non-violence the quality of non-possession is a very important requirement. Civilization in the real sense of the term consists in the deliberate reduction of wants and not in their multiplication. Non-possession or *Aparigraha* is an ancient principle recommended by Gandhi for leading a happy and contented life and attain liberation. Raju's transformation has been brought about by this quality of non-possession and towards the end of the novel on the brink of unconsciousness Raju looks to the horizon and tells Velan that he feels rain is coming over the hills. As Meenakshi Mukherjee states:

Towards the end Raju loses the feeling of an actor performing an act; the act becomes the reality, the mask becomes the man, and Raju the guide turns into a Guru. Whether his fasting really brought the rains down or not is an irrelevant question. The superb ambiguity at the end serves its purpose. More important is Raju's moment of transcending his limited self. (*The Twice Born Fiction* 122)

With the emergence of Gandhi on the political and social geography of the country the Gandhian whirlwind began to sweep over the length and breadth of the land and this led to an unprecedented awakening among women, who responded whole heartedly to Gandhi's call. As Kamaladevi Chottopadhyaya, herself a worthy representative of the women of the Gandhian era states-

Women with pale eyes and blushing cheeks, they who had been gently nurtured behind silken curtains, women who had never looked upon a crowded street, never beheld a strange face...flung themselves into the blinding glare of the day, unshaded and unprotected...They faced perils and privations with a happy light in their eyes and a spring in their limbs. Almost overnight their narrow domestic walls had given way to open a new wide world in which they had a high place. (Naik 90)

Narayan in his novels portrayed the miserable plight of women locked up within the confines of houses. Narayan wanted to bring about a change to this miserable state of women. He made his intention very clear in his book *My Days*. He states-

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (119)

Narayan in his novels portrayed the miserable plight of women locked up within the confines of houses. Narayan endeavored to improve the status of women, he did not portray all his women characters as completely silent and blindly loyal to all the traditional values of the society. While the old women characters in his novels seemed to adhere to the age old customs; on the other hand New Woman like Rosie questioned some of the age old traditions and practices. Raju's mother in *The Guide* is portrayed a woman who seemed to be happy with her position and observed all the customs without questioning any of them. She is startled to know that Rosie had come to her home alone without being accompanied by any man. She says- "How courageous you are! In our day we wouldn't go to the street without an escort" (141). She was full of admiration for Rosie when the latter told her that she was an M.A. in Economics. She reacts-

Good, good, brave girl. Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere. You can ask for your railway ticket, call a policeman if somebody worries you, and keep your money. Brave girl. (*The Guide* 111)

Thus Rosie is represented as a modern woman who is educated and ambitious and strives to attain freedom and economic independence on the basis of her taste and talent.

R.K. Narayan in his novels experimented with these refreshingly new Gandhian ideals and philosophies and made it possible for his readers to understand the crux of these concepts. Gandhi assimilated the best of the East with the best of the West. Gandhi's thought indeed acted as a catalytic agent in the growth of Indian English Fiction. In R. K. Narayan's novels the Gandhian view is treated with an ironic ambiguity as evident in the depiction of characters namely, Krishna, Jagan and Raju. Narayan undoubtedly raises many questions on Gandhian philosophy like *Satyagraha*, non-violence and others and provides a new treatment by constantly redefining these ideas and make it available for the readers to form a dialogue with these concepts and to give it more relevance for the contemporary times. C. D. Narasimhaiah has adequately assessed the role Gandhi played in releasing creative forces in the Indian mind; he is of the opinion that it is Gandhi "who broke the word and freed the thought and broke the thought and freed the thing that made us speak like men". To conclude the essence of Gandhian



philosophy is to empower every individual, irrespective of class, caste, colour, creed or community and these ideas are still pertinent today and therefore the need to contextualize Gandhi's ideas according to the requirement of the twenty first century is equally essential.

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