

Images of Gandhi in the novels of the 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi is a predominant character in Indo-Anglian fiction devoted to politics and struggle for independence. The Gandhian ideology was a potent force behind India's national upsurge. So no Indian English novelist writing during this period could avoid the impact of Gandhian ideology. In fact Gandhi became a recurring presence in the novels of the period. Indian English literature really took a new direction under his impact in matters of subject matter and style. Under the influence of Mahatma the Indian writers turned from romanticism to realism. The "Big Three" of the Indian English novel---MulkRaj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao---- besides other novelists turned to social realities of their time and carved man's image in their art. Now, Gandhi has been presented in the novels of the "Big Three" of the Indian English novel sometimes as a character talking with other characters and sometimes through his ideology. So Gandhi as a major figure in these novels undoubtedly merits a special discussion. So no discussion of Indian English of the novel of the period would be complete without an assessment of the all pervasive influence of Mahatma.

1. Introduction

The period spanning 1920-1947 in the history of India's struggle for independence has been designated as 'The Era of the Gandhian Revolution' in Indian literature. According to Kai Nicholson, "A character who has loomed large in Indo-Anglian fiction during and after his lifetime is Mahatma." In fact, the ideology of M.K.Gandhi was a moving force behind India's national upsurge against the British rule in India. His image and personality and his socio-political philosophy left a deep impress upon the minds of people in India including the creative writers as well as the other men of sensibility. To quote Anand, Gandhi "Gandhi became a legend a tradition and an oracle" to the masses in India. He came to be regarded by the people in India as their Messiah, the 'avatar' of Rama and Krishna. This magical of Mahatma grabbed the imagination of many writers of Indian English fiction to such an extent that they felt an inner urge to probe his ideas and ideals directly and implicitly in their works. Gandhi himself was not a literature. Yet Indian literature took a new direction under Gandhian influence in matters of subject-matter and style. His insistence on truth and his pragmatic approach to life really gave a potent impetus to realism in fiction in place of the elements of romance, adventure and mystery. Now, though not a creator of any system of thought or philosophy to be termed as Gandhian philosophy how certain concepts lying at the core of his philosophy like *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Swadeshi* (made in one's own countryare), *Swaraj* (self-rule), *Satyagraha* (truth-force) and *Harijan uplift* (removal of untouchability) embodied in the fiction of the Big Three of the Indian English fiction is the subject of this article.

2. Mahatma Gandhi in the 'Big Three'

The Indian English novel of 1930s was deeply influenced by the epoch-making political, social and ideological ferment caused by Gandhian movement. The most significant event in the history of Indian English literature of the period is the

appearance on the scene of the major trio --- Anand, Rao and Narayan. The period marks the beginning of modern independent India. It is conspicuous for different Movement of 1930-32, The Three Round Table Conferences, the Gandhian movement of Harijan uplift etc. These movements, especially the Gandhian ideology deeply impressed the 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction. They reveal in their works their sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by Gandhian Revolution. Actually, it was very hard for novelists of that tempestuous period to resist the temptation of portraying the legendary leader in their works--- a leader who, in the words of Nehru, was "like a powerful current of fresh air... like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes..." (*The Discovery of India*). Probably, that is why in the novels of Anand, Narayan and Rao Gandhi appears as a figure of real life. However, Rao's modes of presenting the Mahatma are considerably different from those of Anand and Narayan. Despite Anand's pronounced Marxist bias, his fictional treatment of Gandhi and Gandhian ideology shows considerable artistic detachment. Though he challenges some of Gandhi's ideas and attitudes, he has never questioned their underlying sincerity and humanism. The images of Gandhi projected in his novels are, therefore, authentic, objective and free from emotional adoration of Mahatma. Rao's firm faith and belief in Gandhian thought induces him to idealise Mahatma in his novel as an absolute god, an incarnation of Krishna, and a symbol of celestial command. And Narayan in his novel deals with the irresistible appeal of Gandhi for the masses of Indian people. His picture of Gandhi's activities and daily routine is authentic. He brings out the major concepts of Gandhian philosophy and shows how Gandhi touches and transforms the lives of the common people.

Anand's *Untouchable* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, among all other Indian English novels, stand out for their intrinsic artistic merit as well as for their elaborate treatment of a few concepts of Gandhian philosophy. *Untouchable* remains a very sensitive,

compassionate, and realistic portrayal of the humiliation and indignities suffered by the untouchables, and a relentless exposure of the Hindu caste system. The novel explores the process by which the Hindu community systematically alienates a section within its fold on the excuse of 'religion' and 'tradition'. Bakha, the protagonist of the piece is segregated within the nation. His very touch is considered hateful and defiling. His acute sense of humiliation and segregation comes to be alleviated with the arrival of Gandhi towards the end of the novel to address the a public meeting. The word 'Mahatma' was like a magical magnet, to which, Bakha, like all other people about him, rushed blindly. To the majority of these people Gandhi was a saint like Guru Nanak, or "An Avatar of the Gods of Vishnu and Krishna." In the meeting at Golbagh Gandhi spoke on the evil of untouchability, his aversion to this age-old practice which he deems a blot on Hindu society. He addressed the untouchables as the 'Harijans' or the men of God. He also expresses his genuine love for the out castes. Bakha felt thrilled when Gandhi says that "if a have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition. Therefore I prayed that, if I should be born again, I should be so, not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra, but as an outcaste, as an untouchable." Bakha is both intrigued and mystified by Gandhi's speech. "The Mahatma seemed to have touched the most intimate corners of his soul." (p.165) Momentarily, he even forgets the fact of his own untouchability. The Mahatma had left a "glow of brotherliness and humanitarianism" in his trail. What Anand at this stage obviously does is not to glorify Gandhi the man but Gandhi the symbol of transformation and hope. Gandhi's condemnation of the age-old practice of untouchability and valorization of the job of scavenging as equal to any other respectable profession at least spiritually rehabilitates Bakha in the nation where he feels segregated, restoring (though tentatively) his sense of self-respect and including him in the process of forging an indigenous identity.

In his *The Road* also Anand harps on the Gandhian theme of untouchability, his sensitive awareness of Gandhi's ideas and ideologies. Here Anand shows how, though mainly because of Gandhi's initiative the government of Independent India was forced to officially abolish social and religious discrimination against the untouchables, Gandhi's dream of *Swaraj* still remains a farce because of the persistence of the bigoted attitude and prejudice of the Caste-Hindus against the untouchables. In the novel *Dooli Singh*, the village headman is the Gandhian who champions the cause of the Harijans against the cruelty of the Caste-Hindus like Thakur Singh. Like Bakha in *Untouchable* Bhiku in this novel is an outcaste, an untouchable. But he is more sensitive and more conscious of his freedom and human dignity than Bakha. Bhiku's decision to leave the village for Delhi "Where there would be no caste or outcaste clearly reminds the reader that the struggle for the Gandhian values has not yet ended.

As in *Untouchable*, in *The Sword and Sickle* too Gandhi appears as a flesh-and-blood character and argues with his fellow-characters on the merits of truth and non-violence. In the novel *Lal Singh*, the protagonist is a Punjabi youth. He was an avowed Communist. He returns to India after being released

from a prison camp in Germany. He organizes peasant movement in Punjab but receives a major setback. With the hope of alleviating the miseries of the peasants he meets Gandhiji seeking his help. But he was upset to hear Gandhi talking of the spiritual significance of non-violence, self-sacrifice and tolerance. When Gandhi flatly turns down his prayer to him to go to Rajgarh, Lalu and his party begin to lose faith in Gandhian ideologies. But it is only at the end of the novel that realization dawns upon Lalu about the truth of Gandhi's firm faith in the efficacy non-violence.

In *The Big Heart* Anand is critical of Gandhi's Swadeshi Movement in the name of opposing the ushering of mechanization and industrialization. Here the character Mahasha Hans Raj represents the Gandhian view in the novel. He, along with his followers Professor Majid and Satyapal, preaches Gandhi's gospel of Swadeshi. They persuade the jobless Thathiars (coppersmiths) to a Boycott Movement against the introduction of machinery in India with the motivation that the introduction of machines is not only the cause of their massive unemployment but also it runs counter to the teachings of Gandhi that the introduction of machinery is a symbol of the imposition of the British rule in India. Anant, the protagonist of the novel sincerely wants to usher in the Age of machine but his effort was foiled by Mahasha Hans Raj and professor Majid who persuade the Thathiars "that the real enemy is hidden here, the factory which is going to convert you all from feudal slaves to wage slaves." (p.204)

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is unquestionably a 'Gandhi novel'. Gandhi does not appear in the novel but the charisma of his personality is always felt by the readers of the novel. In it Rao relates the story of *Kanthapura* a South Indian village, an obscure, out of the way village slumbering for centuries but suddenly waking up to life, to the non-violent, non-cooperation movement of Gandhi. Here Moorthy is the 'avatar' of Gandhi. Through 'Harikathas' Moorthy spreads the message of the Mahatma in the whole village. He exhorts young men of the village and asks them to throw away their foreign clothes and become Gandhi men. He organizes Gandhi work in the village and forms the Congress committee. After Gandhi's arrest in the Salt-Satyagraha, Moorthy launches "Don't Touch the Government movement." The repressive measures of the police fail to cowdown the zealous fighters of freedom. He likens Gandhi to Rama and Redmen to Ravana and calls Swaraj, the three-eyed. The whole atmosphere begins to resound with the cries of "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai, Vande Mataram." He gives a practical form to the Gandhian programme of Swadeshi and eradication of untouchability. There are dharnas, picketings and Satyagraha under the influence of Gandhi. In fact, Gandhi in this novel has been mythicized, and in this mythicizing process the temporal is elevated to the eternal, and *Kanthapura* is transformed almost to a Gandhi-Purana.

R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma* is a Gandhian novel. Though technically Sriram is the hero of the novel and the plot revolves round him the predominant figure, even though he is seldom on the stage, is Gandhiji, and the theme of the novel is definitely Gandhism. Apparently the theme of the novel is the Bharti-Sriram romance which gains a new dimension in the background of their common allegiance to the Mahatma. The Mahatma is portrayed here as a warm, loving and good-humoured Bapu. Narayan brings to the fore the major concepts

of Gandhian philosophy-'spinning on the Charka, the practice of absolute truth and non-violence, the idea of purity, self-discipline, and self-reliance, and the removal of untouchability. Narayan also shows how through the impact of his personality Gandhi brings about changes in the life of the common people.

3. Conclusion

The 'Big Three' of the Indian English fiction show in their novels their sensitive awareness of the impact let loose by

Gandhian Revolution. In their novels Gandhiji is a predominant character. He appears as a figure of real life. Sometimes he appears as a person and in some novels as an unseen, hidden presence. He has been projected as an apostle of sainthood, holiness and moral uprightness. He is portrayed as the architect of modern India. But in some novels Gandhi appears as larger than life, and is much romanticised, mythicised and fictionalised.

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