

Avowal to Aspersion A Comparative Study of Gandhian Philosophy in Select Indian English Novels

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Political Leaders in Indian Writing in English

Political figures across generations have often inspired creative writers to use them as source materials for spinning out tales concerning the human journey in its various aspects. Amongst such illustrious political figures, Mahatma Gandhi stands out head and shoulders above the rest for being the fountain-head of not only the most number of fictional efforts, but also in the sense that creative writers have incessantly continued to return to him for nearly a century now.

Gandhi and Indian Diaspora



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The emergence of Gandhi on the Indian intellectual terra firma was like the glowing emergence of the full moon on a dark chaotic night. As the imperialist rulers of India established their strong arm stranglehold over the ruled and as their extortionist regime discovered new and newer ways of subjugating the people, voices of resistance to their machinations started growing. Amidst such general chaos, Gandhi started his work of political re-organisation of Indians from the far off land of South Africa. Having reached there in 1894 as an apprentice lawyer he was immediately thrown in the middle of the vortex of socially and politically hostile circumstances. As he accepted the gauntlet of leading the dispossessed community of Indian contractual labourers there, he was led into thinking about the condition of Indians abroad as well as in their homeland in an increasingly engaging way. His persistent desire to deal with issues at deeper and more meaningful levels brought him in touch with Indian intellectuals of various hues. In 1908 he came out with a bold monograph titled *Hind Swaraj* delineating India's condition at the hands of its rulers and possible ways of getting rid of not only the political regime but also the ill effects of India's engagement with the West.

Gandhi's Return to India – High Hopes of People

By the time Gandhi returned to India in 1914, his aura had effectively preceded him. Educated people with nationalistic leanings looked up to him with a degree of high hopes. It was in such a milieu that the first novels in India to be written in English were in the making. The writers found a natural icon in Gandhi, an icon who was in dire demand as he had a discerning mind that was not shy of fusing thought and action, ideas and experimentation, philosophy and politics. Gandhi's clairvoyance of separating the good from the bad, the essential from the

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redundant, pragmatic from the ideal, the viable from the desired, made his ideals of great fictional value. Thus began the first phase of Indian writers' long association with Gandhian ideas forming the core of their thematic delineations.

***Kanthapura*: Depiction of Gandhi**



Raja Rao's, first novel, *Kanthapura*, published in 1938, is unique in depicting the transforming effects of Gandhi's enunciations on Indian village life. By adopting the mythic technique Raja Rao has given a large perspective to Gandhian ideology. He sees him as an incarnation in the tradition of Shiva, Rama, Krishna and Buddha who came upon this earth to liberate it from demons and provide happiness to their devotees.

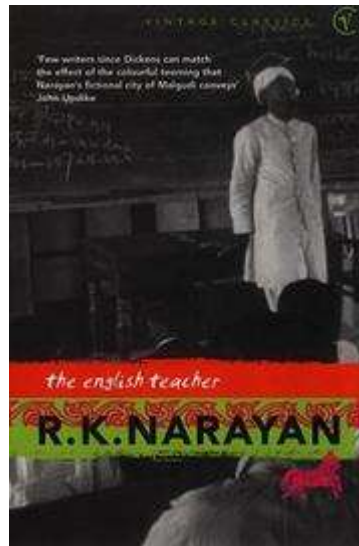
Gandhi is always in the background of *Kanthapura* which undertakes the freedom struggle under the leadership of Moorthy, who is Gandhi's staunch devotee. The inscription from the *Gita* on the inner title page of the novel: "Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come" radiates Raja Rao's sentiments about Gandhi" (Sharma, K 10).

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R. K. Narayan's Gandhi



The opening lines of R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1946) depict that Krishnan, the protagonist, is Gandhian in being truly self-examining and self-critical. Although in the whole novel there is no direct mention of Gandhi, but the way his enunciations moulded the mood of the times is clearly visible in the actions and views of the protagonist. His habit of "a remorseless self-analysis" (7) is essentially Gandhian in nature. In the novel Gandhian ideology can be found in the contexts other than the struggle for independence. There are multiple references to Western education where the protagonist raises the questions. Further he is aware of a flimsy involvement with his pupils the scope of which is set by the Westernised education system with its emphasis on attendance and mugging up of foreign literary authors without any genuine scope of understanding them or imbibing any learning from them.

Another Gandhian character is Krishnan's father who is an educated person and opts to settle in his village. Use of old paper or not wasting it, and use of old pen and the ink prepared by

himself shows his Gandhian traits. Narayan's intentions are very clear in portraying the character of an educated person living in a village and trust in village handicraft.

The Headmaster of the play school is a very prominent Gandhian character in the novel. He believes in purely Gandhian concept of education. Gandhian traits we find in the character of the headmaster are like truth and determination to change for the better. The headmaster renounces his ancestral property, a fine house in Lawley extension. He believes in Gandhian philosophy of non-possession and the dignity of labour with which one can change the condition for the betterment. Krishnan is opposed to the perpetuating system of education that stultifies his imagination and hence believes in social freedom and independence of mind. "His soul revolted against the British education and hence he gave up and preferred to work as primary school teacher" (Singh 23). Accordingly he decides to resign from college and start working in the kindergarten being run by the headmaster. He leads a type of life which is recommended in the Gita in which Gandhi also strongly believed. He is ready to work for the benefit of others without caring for his self-interest.

Bhattacharya's Gandhi in *So Many Hungers*



Bhattacharya's very first novel *So Many Hungers* (1947) bears a clear imprint of Gandhi on it. The novel explicitly depicts the Gandhian love for rural India and her cultural past. "... it actually covers the war years with their uncertainties, privations, agonies, cruelties, frustrations. The foreground is occupied partly by the Basu family, and partly by the peasant family, the girl Kajoli, her mother, her brother." (Iyengar 412).

In order to present the whole scenario of freedom struggle and famine from a Gandhian perspective, Bhattacharya has portrayed a full-fledged character in the image of Gandhi. Popularly known as Devata, the celestial being, Devesh is an object of a kind of reverence for the villagers. "When we call him Devata, our tongue and our soul earn merit. We are only peasant folk, sir" (23). Deveta advises Rahoul, his grandson, to participate in the National Movement. Rahoul expresses the best kind of metamorphosis brought by Gandhi in the psyche of an average Indian through the catalysis of experience.

Bhattacharya depicts his themes of freedom struggle, women's position in society, crusade against the social evils, and his love for the traditions of India from an explicitly

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Gandhian perspective. We have the intellectuals turning to Gandhian, merging of the different sections of the society under Gandhian influence.

Depiction of Gandhian Aura in Pre-Independence Period

All these three novels of the first phase delineate Gandhian aura of a Mahatma, a saint and more significantly a teacher. In these novels all the protagonists are the Gandhian replicas who play the role of teachers in various forms.

In *The Kanthapura* Moorthy, the protagonist is a youth in the village who teaches villagers the political and spiritual lessons. Krishnan, the protagonist, in *The English Teacher*, is a middle aged teacher who, first in a college then in a school, teaches the Gandhian way to the students of all ages. Devesh Basu, the protagonist, in the novel *So Many Hungers* is an old and retired teacher who teaches not only Gandhian philosophy but also attains the place of a *Devata*.

All these three novels cover all the three stages of life, viz., youth, aged and old. India, yet to be born or in her infancy wanted to be educated and the idea of education was conceived by Gandhi in 1808. For Gandhi political freedom was merely a fact and not an objective. Gandhi's main concern was education, primarily basic education through which one could achieve real freedom. This concept of Gandhian education can clearly be discerned in these novels.

Metaphoric Cessation

Gandhi's death in the beginning of 1948 didn't merely mean his physical obliteration from the scene of action. It signified a kind of metaphoric cessation too. The short intervening

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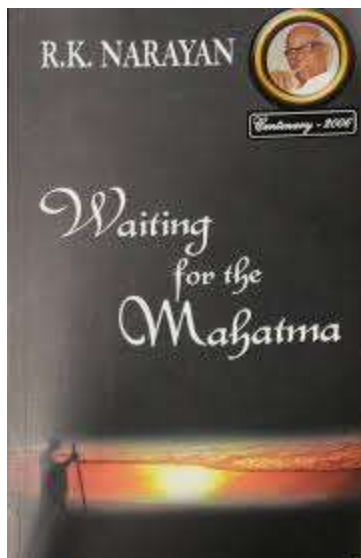
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period between India's freedom and his death was probably a period of inordinate anxiety-laden length for him. The intensity of violence-filled process of birth for the twin nations was cause enough for him to re-assess the relevance of all that he had worked and stood for throughout his life. India through its bloody actions had amply demonstrated to the man himself as well as to all those who cared to follow his footsteps how it gave scant regard to his ideals, ideals which he lived and died for. The mood of the nation was that of token gratitude to the man and his methods.

Gandhi in Post-Independence Period– An Ideological Shift

Writers of fiction function also as chroniclers of fictional history of their times. Their mindscapes are palimpsests on which are etched the psychic predilections of their age. When during the pre-independence period the nation saw Gandhi as an incarnation of hope, writers also held him as harbinger of change, modernity, freedom, and so on. But in the aftermath of freedom as the nation found it convenient to pay him ritualistic obeisance, so did the writers.

Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*



Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* deals with the triumphs and tragedies of Sriram, the protagonist, an orphan teenager of Malgudi who is brought up by his grandmother. His young heart has started to attract his natural attention towards beauty and charm around him. Narayan introduces the heroine dramatically and gives the preliminary hints of Sriram-Bharati's long-drawn romance. Sriram through Bharati finds himself amidst Gandhi's followers. "The hero Sriram is simply a shadow of Bharati who for the sake of his love, follows her and gets innocently involved in the National Movement willy-nilly" (Singh 36). Initially Sriram becomes a recognized member of Gandhi's followers and forms a trio with Bharati and Gopad and accompanies Gandhi in his tour of the famine affected villages near Malgudi but practically he has no knowledge of villages. "In her company he remains a true devotee of Gandhiji and tries to follow his principles. But whenever he moves farther from Bharati, he becomes injudicious and inordinate" (Sharma A 101).

In *Waiting for the Mahatma* varied motives prompt the characters to join the Mahatma and his movement. The characters like Natesh, Jagdish and the contractor act out of expediency,

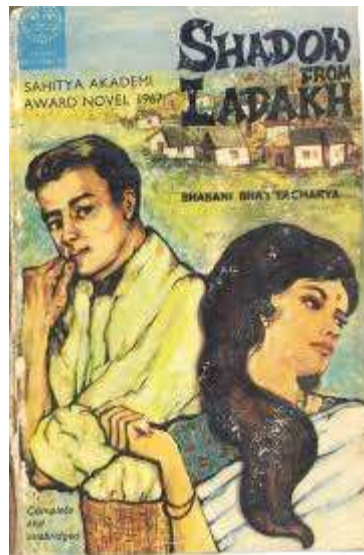
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not of principle. The Mahatma remains incomprehensible to Sriram's Granny. She does not understand Gandhi and his political mission. She feels that he and his followers are trying to disturb the smooth-running stream of life. She does not want her grandson Sriram to invite trouble on himself by associating with Gandhi and his dangerous preaching. "Narayan wants to point out that the impact of Gandhi was different on different strata of the society" (Singh 35).

Bhabani's Shadow from Ladakh



Bhabani Bhattacharya in his novel *Shadow from Ladakh*, (1966) presents a clash between two ways of life – the Gandhian and the Western. Both have a widespread following in India. The novel proffers the conflict between the old and the new; between the rural and the urban; between asceticism and aestheticism; between political and technological aspects and stresses the need for the synthesis of divergent sets of values for an all-round progress of the nation.

Gandhigram and Steeltown symbolize two ways of life and two philosophies in direct opposition and it also espouses to the novelist's wavering faith between Gandhi and Nehru.

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Gandhian ideology in its social, economic, political, cultural and moral dimensions is dealt herewith, from two different points of views.

Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*

Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) is a socio-political novel in its concern. Again, the novel 'Comrade Kirillov' has represented the transition period when the protagonist or the main characters do not affirm completely the Gandhian philosophy, rather they question its feasibility and sustainability. The protagonist does not have full faith in Gandhi. He has grave misgivings about Gandhi and his ideology. He makes vituperative attack on Mahatma Gandhi. 'Kirillov, however, "knew one thing, he was finished with Gandhi and all that" (22). Gandhi is a "friend and fool of the poor, the Sadhu reactionary... whose birth in this world has set history many centuries backwards" (33). The personal besmirching is done as "'Gandhi is a kleptomaniac' and 'Mahatma Gandhi is an ungrown adult'" (35). He even calls Gandhi, "'that old puritan humbug' or 'that fine, moral hypocrite'" (101).

Duality in Kirillov

We can see the duality in Kirillov's mind as a psychological dilemma. "By the end of the book, Kirillov is shown to be a man of contradictions: attacking and worshiping Gandhi simultaneously, deeply loving traditional India but campaigning for a Communist revolution, reciting Sanskrit shlokas but professing Communism" (Pranjape, Introduction XIV). The author's ironic description of Kirillov's dresses, particularly, the necktie "revealed a soul so ambivalent" (25). Ambivalence is the foremost trait of his character. He is full of contradictions.

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Thus the creative writers who found niche in Gandhi have transmogrified him from iconic to ineffectual in the latter half of the century.

Common Thread between Pre and Post- Independence Works

The common thread, interestingly, between the two phases, the pre & post-independence, is that even while the intentions and nature of works, despite belonging to the Gandhian discourse, are of differing scopes, their authors remain common. What is surprising is the ideological shift that they clearly depict in their pre and post-independence stances.

The three authors, namely, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya and R.K. Narayan in the post-independence era of their respective writings align themselves with the predominant social thought, instead of sticking to their own orbit of thinking. They seem to be unmindful if in the process of thematic realignment their own earlier self-avowed commitment to the Gandhian vision of India's destiny gets skewed, twisted or thwarted. Here it is needless to say that the authors under discussion do not belong to the category of sundry writers. They rather belong to that exalted stratum of writers of fiction in English who are known for their fictional achievements. As representative writers having a width of appeal, their common deviation merits careful delineation. Possibly the growing disenchantment with the political practitioners professing faith in Gandhian ways has led to this estrangement.

The Third Phase – The Denigration of Gandhian Values

A serious reader of Gandhi as a fictional ideologue, who has seen the first two phases, would not be off the mark if such a reader awaits the third phase that would be a natural corollary to the first two phases and would bring in some coldness. With the publication of

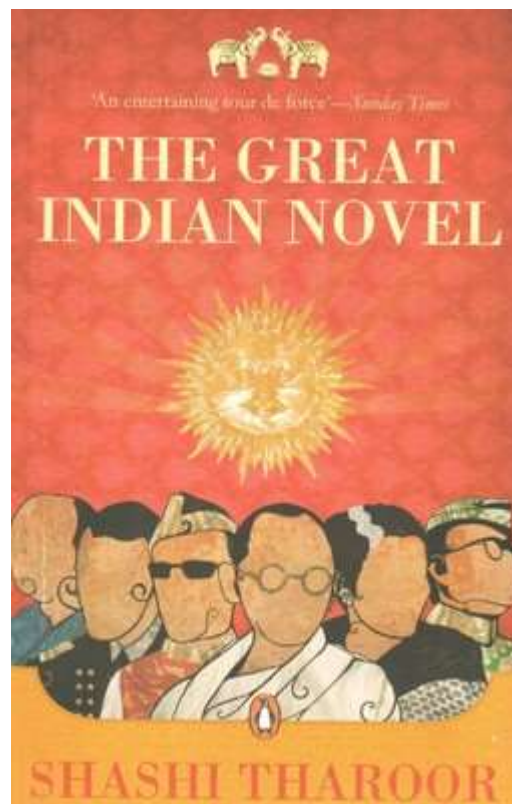
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Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Gandhi unmistakably slips into that phase. Some of the writers of this period depict Gandhi as nothing but a man of lamentable portents, ominous contradictions, consuming desires, pernicious effects etc. The verdant spring of Gandhi's adulation through works of fiction, as it journeyed through the second phase, gave away to a period of ideological denudation of autumnal characteristics.

***The Great Indian Novel* – An Effort to Besmirch Gandhi**



In *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), the author has artistically interwoven the story of the Mahabharata into the texture of pre- and post-independence Indian history. More than half of the novel is preoccupied with Ganga Dutt / Mahatma Gandhi as the central character who is also the Bhishma of the Mahabharata. This meta-narrator co-opts and converts Gandhi into a diffused

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political projectile. In this novel Gandhi serves as a mere textual tool to propagate the personal-political prejudices of the author.

The author gives description of the appearance of Ganga and one can easily judge that this is an alibi for caricaturing Gandhi:

Picture the situation for yourself. Gangaji, the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already balder..., peering at you through round-rimmed glasses....People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loin cloth. 'Excuse me, I was just preparing myself an enema', he would say, with a feeble smile, as if that explained everything. (35)

Here the denigration of Gandhian values can be observed: "You smug, narcissistic bastard, you!' Amba screamed, hot tears running down her face. 'Be like you, with your enemas and your loincloths? Never!" (29).

Gandhi believed truth to be the ultimate reality and the search of truth was one of the primary aims of his life. In the novel there is a satirical tone when Gangaji says, "I shall pursue the Truth, in all its manifestations, including the political and, indeed, the sexual. I shall seek to perfect myself, a process I began many years ago, in this very palace" (45).

Keeping in mind his "terrible vow of old Bhishma, and the principles of celibacy" (228) he wanted to make an experiment that would help him in rediscovering the moral and physical strength.

But I have asked her (Sarah Behn) to join me in an experiment that will be the ultimate test of my training and self-restraint. She will lie with me, unclad, and cradle me in her arms, and I shall not be aroused. In that non-arousal I hope to satisfy myself that I have remained pure and disciplined. And not merely that. It is my prayer that this test will help me to rediscover the moral and physical strength... (228)

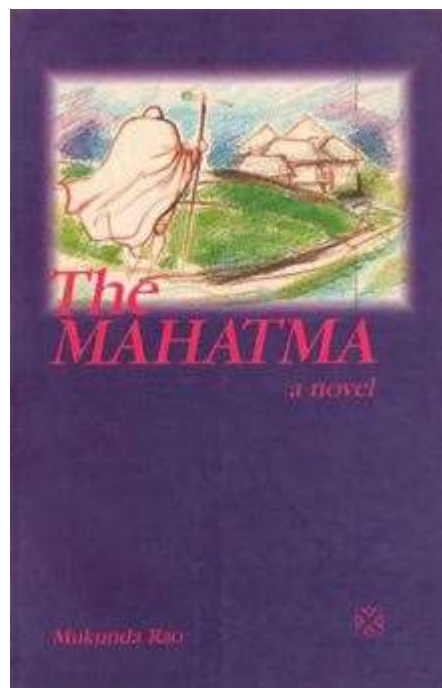
In the midst of the exultation and celebrations of Independence, the most dejected man at the end of a prolonged struggle fell victim to his assassin's bullets. Amba, metamorphosed in Shikhandin (Nathuram Godse) confronts the celibate Bhishma, Gangaji and denounces him for dereliction of duty:

What a wreck you are, Bhishma! The voice went on 'what a life you've led. Spouting on and on about our great traditions and basic values, but I don't see the old wife you ought to be honouring in your dotage. Advising everyone about their sex, marrying people off, letting them call you the Father of the Nation, but where is the son you need to light your funeral pyre, the son of your own loins?... 'You make me sick Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive, barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking other reptiles' eggs, an infertile old fool seeking solace like a calf from the udders of foreign cows, a man who is less than a woman. The tragedy of this country springs from you – as nothing else could after that stupid oath of which you are so pathetically proud.

Bhishma, the pyre has already been lit for you in the flames that are
burning your country. You have lived long enough! (232)

Tharoor portrays the complete mental picture of Ganga/Gandhi after the partition of the land at the time of independence from the British. The narrator has found Gandhi alienated from his own people. They not only reject him but they negate his ideology also. In order to reinforce the impact of the serious allegation, Tharoor deviates from the popularly known account of Gandhi's death and puts in the mouth of the dying leader not "Hey Ram" but "I...have... failed, 'he whispered" (234). The narrator's overall tone suggests that the father of nation died as a defeated, desolate and disillusioned man.

Mukunda Rao's *The Mahatma*



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In Mukunda Rao's *The Mahatama* (1992), the author furnishes the minute details of the Mahatma's visit to the riot-torn areas of Noakhali and presents the facts in a chronological order in episodic form. The novelist through his perceptive creativity sticks to historical precision as far as the chronological description of factual events goes, the way he delineates, by suppressing or skirting even the critical facts.

The opening of the novel renders Gandhi as an eccentric, isolated, full of despair, restless, unwelcomed, unpredictable and a complete failure. His unique way, his eccentricity always surprises even his close disciples. In his visit to Noakhali, he leaves most of his disciples behind in a daze. "His cruel rejection of them, his apathy to all their pleas had left them heart-broken and confounded: never at any time in the past had the Mahatma acted thus" (1). Gandhi forbids his associates to accompany him and "The question why the Mahatma wanted to isolate himself from his close disciples did surprise Shankar....Mitra was puzzled and bothered" (1). The Mahatma walks fast with great energy but his face is full of sadness. "The Mahatma's lusty strides, his locomotor restlessness and energy seemed to mark at his face which looked sad and forlorn" (1). Mahatma Gandhi is not only unwelcome but the people protest against him and even try to bar his way by strewing garbage.

The Pensive Image of Gandhi

Factually, during this period there were occasions when Gandhi harboured doubts about the efficacy of his methods and the meaningfulness of his actions, but he quickly emerged from these nagging doubts. Here the Mahatma does not try to get over his dubiousness rather he remains in the pensive mood. He is shown very dejected and he is becoming increasingly

despondent about the way things are going. "The world was coming to an end...There was only

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corruption and violence everywhere in the world: a celebration of death. What is man ? A cruel joke? What is life? A play of death? What am I?”(20).

Even the close associates do not agree with the Mahatma and his *brahmacharya* experiment, *Yajna*. Gandhi sends Shankar out and Mitra goes out intentionally leaving the Mahatma alone with his principles or ideology. The author picturises the dismal atmosphere in which he visualizes the agony of the Mahatma. “The afternoon was gloomy. The sky suddenly looked besieged by dark clouds. The trees looked sombre, there was no life in the air, everyone looked heartsick. There was something funereal about the whole scene. The Mahatma was in agony” (156).

The novel comes to an end on a note of utter confusion. The novelist has condemned Gandhi to death eleven months before the event took place in actuality.

Sudhir Kakar’s *Mira and the Mahatma*



Sudhir Kakar’s *Mira and the Mahatma* (2004) ... “is a true story of nine years- from 1925 to 1930, and from 1940 to 1942- in the lives of Madeline Slade (aka Mirabehn) and Gandhi, where their lives were entwined more intimately than any other period of their long

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association (Author's Note). Kakar satirically comments on Gandhi's *ashramas* and the *ashramites*. He tries to unmask the inner reality of the *ashramas* where very few inmates can be considered strong people marching together for the awakening of a person's spiritual potential. The author being a psychoanalyst analyses the inmates psychologically and finds that most of the *ashramites* imitate without understanding the principle or idea behind the imitated action.

The narrator throws light on the complex relationship of Gandhi and Mira, thereby unveiling the man behind the Mahatma. He depicts the most crucial stage in Gandhi's life, his growing attraction towards Mira and he unwrapped her all-consuming desire to serve Gandhi and desperate longing to be close to him at all times. Thus the author by devising the technique of psychoanalysis tries to calumniate Gandhi's image. The author casts aspersions on Gandhi's failure on other fronts also like Hindu-Muslim unity, removal of untouchability, celibacy which becomes the main reason of severe depression and other complications in him.

Prithvi Singh, a legendary revolutionary, who does not believe in Gandhian ideology, expresses his views on various issues frankly:

Forgive me, Bapu, but in your ashram is there place for anything other than sex? During their leisure time, the people here constantly discuss the subject. It seems to me that in obedience to your wishes and in an emotional mood, people may take a vow to lead a celibate life but they have not the slightest idea how passions rock the mind and how to control them. (232)

Prithvi disagrees to the Bapu's mantra of life: "Just like the way Mirabai was absorbed in God, I saw this English lady absorbed in Bapu. Yet I never saw the lines of satisfaction on her

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face. I was troubled by the question why persons living so close to Bapu did not use Bapu's mantra of life to make their own lives happier?" (240). The examples quoted are certainly not exhaustive, they are illustrative of the novelist's bias in projecting his view of Gandhi's nature.

Debunking Gandhi– An Outcome of Authors' Personal Aspirations

However, a quarter of a century after freedom as the nation-centric consciousness could be palpably felt to be slipping behind, individualistic aspirations started gaining legitimacy. This social drift could be viewed in the mirror that literary creations belonging to this era represent.

Writers of fiction of English in India found it lucrative to align their styles and themes to those of their Western counterparts. In most cases their sensibilities led them naturally to west-centrism because of their westernised education. A trend of seeking legitimacy in the opinion of Western readership and its critical canon gained ascendancy.

Gandhi who not only waged a prolonged ideological struggle against political and cultural domination of India by European powers, but also took up cudgels against the idea and practices of Western civilization, has predominantly been a subject of ridicule in the Western world. Whenever such ridicule emanates from the Indian hinterland or the Indian classes, the views of the former not only draw legitimacy from it, but they also win vital breathing space.

Fanciful Delineation of Gandhi – Motivated Degradation

Thus there is a befitting case of quid pro quo between the two. In such a scenario a growing coterie of writers from India has taken up fictional depiction of Gandhi's social, and more specifically personal, life and imputes fanciful dubiousness to it. Since inventing chinks in

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Gandhian ideology, i.e. the ideology whose subtleness and efficacy have been vindicated by historical tide and time, may well be beyond the creative ken of such writers, what they feel compelled to manipulate is the enigmatic persona of Gandhi the man.

The strategy of debunking Gandhi is blatantly conjured up to add to the number of readers of this fiction, helping writers, who have “a morbid fascination” for Gandhi's idiosyncratic openness, to “sell their books” (Tushar Gandhi). If in the process of fabricating such titillating facts, these writers have to be economic with Truth, they do so without qualms. While globally an understanding of Gandhian principles seems to be gaining in popularity (e.g. in sustainable development studies, environmental sciences, peace conferences, international relations, etc), such fiction soaring on the wing of phantasmagoria is striving to discover its own dark hole on the azure horizon. Thinkers like Gopalkrishna Gandhi are not off the mark in observing, “Despite this, Gandhiphile thinking and writing continues to grow and continues to dwarf the Gandhiphobic” (Gandhi Gopal).

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