

Impact of Gandhian Ideology on Indian English Novelists

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Abstract

This paper is an initiative to study the impact of Gandhian ideology on Indian English writers in twentieth century colonial India. The pioneer of Indian Independence struggles Mahatma Gandhi not only fought for India's freedom but also Indians' freedom from poverty, injustice, inequality, untouchability and other evil practices. Gandhi had a lasting influence on Indian English writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan. These writers were influenced by Gandhian philosophy of truth and Non-Violence and translated his philosophy into their classic novels such as Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Untouchable*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. In R K Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Gandhi has been portrayed as the dominant motif. Mulk Raj Anand's Novels reveal the deep influence of Gandhian ideology. His first novel *Untouchable* depicts a reality of distinction between the people of India on the basis of caste inequality. Gandhi came as savior for millions of oppressed and downtrodden Indians.

Keywords: Gandhian ideology, Indian Writing in English, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, inequality, ideology, principles, oppressed.

Indian English writers of twentieth century colonial India are supposed to be the ambassadors of Mahatma Gandhi, his ideology and of course his struggle to get India free. Writers such as Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand through their novels and short stories spread the message of Mahatma Gandhi. These writers were instrumental in infusing the sense of 'nationalism' through their writings. They vehemently followed the Gandhian philosophy of life best on Non-Violence, Satyagraha, Love, Simplicity, social evils etc. They got their inspiration from Gandhi and compared his philosophy to Marxism and Freudian philosophy of life. All these writers adopted Gandhian ideology and they sought motivating moral force in Gandhi.

R. K. Narayan's novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* published in 1955 is all about the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian freedom struggle. Although the novel came up in 1955, the events narratives and characters make us acknowledge as a Gandhian novel. Narayan presents Gandhi as one of the characters in this novel. The struggles, political characters, and

philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi have been elaborately presented in the novel. Undoubtedly the novel is based on the love affair of Bharti and Sriram but with the development of the novel we find Gandhian philosophy throughout. The novel establishes a correlation between the common Indians and the champions of Indian struggle movement Gandhi and his contemporaries.

The novel opens up with the introduction of Sriram and Bharti. This is the initial stage of the novel. Further progress develops and intertwines their relation with Gandhian philosophy and their involvement in freedom movement. This is seen as Gandhi's influence on mass. Not only Bharti-Sriram but also the self-centred Municipal Chairman, Natesh Kumar finds himself following the path of truth and Non-Violence in his speech. Natesh Kumar joins a public meeting at Nallappa's Grove in Malgudi where he is deeply influenced by Gandhi's call of following Non-Violence to force the British to leave India. Such was the impact of Gandhian ideology during the independence struggle movement. Natesh Kumar is stunned to know that Gandhi urges Indians to avoid any sort of hatred against the British. This is the unique methodology of Mahatma Gandhi which he adopted throughout movements- Non-Cooperation Movement, Dandi March, Champaran Movement, Khilafat Movement and finally 'Quit India Movement'. Gandhi's main focus was to avoid any sort of violence. This was the greatest strength the Mahatma had. Bharti and Sriram join him in this cause. Another revolutionary step which Gandhi took was the call for abolition of the caste system Indian society. He was not only a freedom fighter but also a social reformer against all evil practices prevalent in the society. Through Non-Violence, Gandhi meticulously brought people together at a single platform to struggle for Indian independence:

“Presently Mahatmaji ascended the platform and Sriram hastily took his eyes off the ladies and joined in the hand clapping with well-timed devotion and then in the singing of *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*. After that Gandhi spoke on non-violence and explained how it could be practiced in daily life. 'It is a perfectly simple procedure provided you have faith in it. If you watch yourself you will avoid all actions, big or small, and all thoughts, however obscure, which may cause pain to another [...] 'When someone has wronged you or has done something which appears to you to be evil, just pray for the destruction of that evil. Cultivate an extra affection for the person and you will find that you are able to bring about a change in him. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ meant the same thing when he said, 'Turn the other cheek'” (Narayan 21).

Gandhi himself became an epitome and semblance of simplicity. He did menial jobs such as cleaning the sewage and toilet, washing his cloth himself and making his own cloth using the handloom popularly known as 'Charkha'. He visited famine- hit villages near Malgudi which generated the ray of hope of hundreds of suffering farmers. He was highly opposed to the caste system and untouchability. Sriram has presented his views in the following words:

“When Mahatmaji spoke of untouchability and caste, Sriram reflected, 'There must be a great deal in what he says. We always think we are superior people. How Granny bullies that ragged scavenger who comes to our house every day to sweep the backyard!' Granny was so orthodox that she would not let the scavenger approach nearer than ten yards, and habitually adopted a bullying tone while addressing him. Sriram also took a devilish pleasure in joining the baiting and finding fault with the scavenger's work, although he never paid the slightest attention to their comments. He simply went about his business, driving his broom vigorously and interrupting himself only to ask, 'When will master give me an old shirt he promised so long ago?’ (Narayan 22).

This shows the concern Gandhi had for the Harijans. All these things inspired Sriram and hundreds of thousands of other Srirams all over India which helped Gandhi successfully lead the freedom movement. This impacted on common Indians so much so that they even stopped buying English biscuits. They started rebuking the Indian shopkeepers for selling English goods:

“Have you no sense of shame?’ Sriram asked.

‘Why, why what is the matter?’ the other said, taken aback and then said,

‘Hey, give me the money for what you took and get out of here. You are a fellow in *khadi*, are you? Oh! Oh! I didn’t notice. And so, you think you can do what you like, talk as you like, and behave like a rowdy’.

‘You may say anything about me, but don’t talk of this dress. It is – it is – too sacred to be spoken about in that way’ (Narayan 91).

R K Narayan has presented Gandhi who becomes a source of inspiration and a ray of hope and support for millions of destitute and socially neglected people. *Waiting for the Mahatma* has been presented in a fictitious form in which twenty century colonial India has been depicted. R K Narayan has successfully popularised the real Mahatma Gandhi, the advocate who came from South Africa to fight against the injustice to the Indians by the British through his fictitious Gandhi, a character of his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Sriram and Bharti relation has been presented as a tool to present the greater message of the novel-the political situation of colonial India.

Another luminary of Indian English writer is Raja Rao, who was the contemporary of R K Narayan. His first novel *Kanthapura* was published in 1938. In this novel there are three types of experience that have been mentioned - the political, the religious and the social. Throughout the novel there is an imprint of Gandhian thought and his struggle for freedom of India. Unlike *Waiting for the Mahatma* there is no character as Gandhi in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* but Gandhi’s virtual presence, his thoughts and a large number of his ideological comrades are present in the novel. This novel is all about rural India here an obscure Indian

village Kanthapura being influenced by the Gandhian ideology and the cause of Indian freedom. The protagonist of the novel is a young villager called Moorthy, who is highly influenced by Gandhi. In his Introductory note to *Kanthapura*, C.D. Narasimhaiah mentions the following points:

“The impact of Gandhi on our villages was the impact of a dynamic religion through one of its supreme practitioners; of idealism and a sense of purpose and urgency on a people who had virtually ceased to live, with resignation writ large on their faces. It was Gandhi’s greatness that he produced hundreds of little Gandhis throughout the country” (Narasimhaiah x).

Moorthy, an ardent follower of Gandhi and his philosophy, joins the movement at the very young age. He is highly convinced of the Gandhian ideology of truth and Non-Violence. The novel *Kanthapura* is not only about the struggles of Mahatma Gandhi to make India from the brutal regime of the British but also Gandhi’s concept of how to cater to the intricate problems of persisting poverty, illiteracy and inequality in the society. Gandhiji, undoubtedly led Indian independence movement but after reading *Kanthapura* and even Gandhi’s own autobiography I am constrained from my opinion that Gandhi Ji worked much more for the upliftment of the socio, economic cultural and political state of rural India. His endeavour to consolidate rural economy by promoting Khadi and village industry is a testimony to my opinion. According to Raja Rao Gandhi Ji was highly opposed to the addiction of toddy and liquor by the common rural folk. His appeal was taken as a word of the God. The people of Kanthapura and its periphery started swearing in his name not to touch toddy and liquor. Common folk songs were written by the people:

“Our king, he was born on a wattle- mat,
He’s not the king of the velvet bed,
He’s small and he’s round and he’s bright and he’s sacred,
O, Mahatma, Mahatma, you’re our king, and we are your slaves.

White is the froth of the toddy, toddy,
And the Mahatma will turn poison into nectar clear,
White will become blue and black will become white,
Brothers, sisters, friends and all,
The toddy-tree is a crooked tree.
And the toddy milk is scorpion milk,
O king, O king, when will you come?” (Rao 197).

All these reflect Gandhi’s impact on Indian people and Indian English writers. Raja Rao is among them. In *Kanthapura*, we find an impact of Gandhian ideology in the writings of Raja Rao so much so that he has presented Gandhi as a social reformer. And these movements by Gandhi helped him achieve his dual target of making India free by bringing people of every

walk of life together at a single platform of nationalism and improving the financial, social and political condition of rural India.

Thus, *Kanthapura* practically impacts people of rural India to shun all evil practices, join hands to fight for a greater cause, accept Gandhi ji as their saviour which ultimately empowered Gandhi to lead the independence movements successfully.

Another prolific Indian English novelist Mulk Raj Anand was also a promoter of Gandhian ideology. His novel *Untouchable* has a great impact of Gandhian ideology of untouchability, its root, its impact on the society and Gandhi's parallel struggle to dispel all such evil from the society have been elaborately mentioned in it. *Untouchable* is also about social inequality based on casteism. The pangs of the protagonist of the novel Bakha vividly represents millions of destitute downtrodden of India. Mulk Raj Anand has presented the atrocities of Hindu Brahmin towards the Dalits. They called them 'untouchable' which ignited Mulk Raj Anand to be the voice of millions of 'untouchables' as called by the Hindu Brahmins. According to Anand upper caste Hindu Brahmin exploited the untouchables and even Bakha's sister Sohni was molested by the priest of the village temple. Anand records a famous speech of Mahatma Gandhi in which he talks about the rights of untouchables:

"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 136).

Bakha being an unlettered downtrodden Indian couldn't understand what Gandhi wanted to say about untouchability and what was his vision for these neglected Indians. Gradually Bakha got to understand that Gandhi was his saviour.

"I regard untouchability,' the Mahatma was saying, 'as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This view of mine dates back to the time when I was a child" (Anand 137).

Now Bakha realises that there is someone who raises his voice in favour of Bakha and his community. He is highly impressed with the speech of Gandhi when the latter clearly announces:

"Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow" (Anand 140).

Bakha's respect for Gandhi dwindles after the famous advocate and poet N.N. Bashir is critical of Gandhi and his ideology. Later on, Bashir acknowledges the Gandhian way of life and comes in favour of Gandhian ideology:

“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 regard 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 142).

To conclude I am of the opinion that Gandhi left a lasting imprint on the Indian English writers. These writers got a tool to bring forth the social issues of twentieth century colonial India. They vehemently wrote through their novels against the class conflict, inequality, evil-practices and the cause of poverty in rural India. Gandhi became an ultimate source of inspiration for Indian English writers in the twentieth century. I think R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao are the ambassadors of Indian English Literature who took forward the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi and tried to bring social changes through their writings.

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