

RECONFIGURING THE ROLE OF GANDHI: NATION, HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY IN SELECT INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

Mithilesh K. Pandey

Professor

Dept. of English,,Faculty of Arts

Banaras Hindu University,

Varanasi-221005 (U.P.)

Abstract:

The conditions that urged nationalist consciousness and independent struggles in the third world countries particularly in India during the first half of the 20th century marked the beginning of the Gandhian era. Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagining' of the nation and Partha Chatterjee's "moment of manoeuvre" covertly determine the role of Gandhi as crucial in the emerging nation where there is no common language, religion, ethnicity or shared history. They conceive nationalism as a socially formulated cultural artifact and analyse the various factors responsible for the formation of the modern nation. The pre-independence Indian writers have underlined the role of Gandhi as stimulus in awakening the nationalist consciousness in colonial India. Writing in the midst of political turmoil, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan could not ignore the national movement and hence represented the different facets of Gandhi in their works who was the inspiring force behind the movement of the masses. The present paper attempts to explore the multiple roles of Gandhi, his genius and socio-political acumen as narrated in the fictions of the 'trio' which testify to Partha Chatterjee's interpretation of Gandhi's intervention as the "moment of manoeuvre".

Keywords : Mahatma Gandhi, nation, manoeuvre, masses, independence, imagine, role.

Unlike Europe, the conditions that provoked nationalist consciousness and independence struggles in the third World countries particularly in India during the first half of the 20th century marked the beginning of the Gandhian era. Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation "as an imagined political community" (6) and Partha Chatterjee's "moment of manoeuvre" (125) determine the image of Gandhi as crucial in the emerging nation where there is no common language, religion, ethnicity as shared history. They conceive nationalism as a socially formulated cultural artifact and analyze the various factors

responsible for the formation of the modern nation. However, India, which was divided on the basis of caste and creed, Gandhi's mediation acted as a unifying factor among the peasants, untouchables, marginalized women, the elite and the middle class and awakened a sense of national spirit all over the nation. Negating the logic of the political concept that no nation could be created without war, Gandhi was instrumental in forging a new nation without an armed conflict and through non-violent methods, thus setting a model to the many emerging nations. Just as the methods of resistance are different, the political nature of the new nation is also unique and "distinct from alternative political models such as Anglo-Saxon liberalism, French republicanism, aesthetic communism and Islamic theocracy" (Guha, 758). Though the urgency of the moment was the political independence, but it was imperative to unite the masses of the country. Gandhi's role was essential to mobilize these masses for an unified national identity "but this mobilization could never be achieved", as Partha Chatterjee observes, "because it required the intervention of a political genius and spellbinding of a Gandhi" (150). Therefore a revival of mythical past and a glorification of rural India, attempted by Gandhi himself, were requisite to arouse a cultural nationalism central to nationalist consciousness and to obliterate differences within the nation.

While colonialist writers like Sir John Strachey and others could not even conceive the idea of a unified single nation with regard to India, it fell to the lot of Anglophone writers during 1940's to narrate the image of Gandhi and his dream of a nation and kindle the spirit of nationalism among the millions in the sub-continent. Indian novelists writing in English before independence came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi as the dominating figure in the national movement. For most of the writers, Gandhi became an ideal person struggling against the colonizers through his revolutionary thoughts and actions. As K.R. S. Iyengar perceptively remarks:

Life could not be the same as before, and every segment of our national life—politics, economics, education, religion, social life, language and literature—acquired a more or less pronounced Gandhian hue. Thus it was that Gandhi exercised a potent influence on our language and literatures, both directly through his own writings in English and Gujarati and indirectly through the movements generated by his revolutionary thought and practice (248-49).

Thus being influenced by Gandhi, these novelists prioritized a representation of India breathing in unison, beyond the differences of language, caste, class and gender with its people joining to form one united front in resistance to the colonial rule. English though alien and the language of the colonizer, was the common language of the upper class elite who led the struggle. In India with its diverse linguistic communities, English served as a lingua franca among the educated. According to Benedict Anderson, "the convergence of capitalism

and print technology on the vast diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (46). Anderson emphasizes the role played by the printed novel and the newspaper in making the nation become aware of itself, enabling the citizens of a nation to form an imagined community in the midst of their diversity. The novel conveys the sense of "the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, authors, and readers moving onward through calendrical time" (Anderson 27). Thus these writers constructed the idea of the nation in an alien language in the early stages of the freedom struggle. But the novels written in alien language, consistent with the ideas conceived by Anderson contributed to the imagining of India as a nation, highlighting its unity in diversity. The novels of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan testify to the upsurge of mass movements for the freedom and to the role of the Mahatma which was the common and dominant factor of these upheavals. Writing in the midst of the political turmoil, these novelists could not ignore the diverse facets of the national movement and had to capture in their novels the various dimensions of the role and impact of Gandhi. The present paper attempts to analyse the power structures in the society and the representation of the role of Mahatma Gandhi and his relevance in the select novels of 'trio' in the pre-independence period.

Before independence, the role or impact of Gandhi is vigorously reflected in Raja Rao's maiden novel *Kanthapura* published in 1938. The story is based on a South Indian village divided into different sections according to caste and class and awakened to Gandhian principles and values through the intervention of an urbanized villager and Gandhian Moorthy. He was a representative of the nationalist students who went back to their native villages in the 1930's and strove to reform the social life of the villages and build miniature nationalist groups to resist the onslaughts of the foreign government. Gandhi, however, with his miraculous powers became a beacon of hope for Indian peasants with his call for social reform and self-sufficiency. As Claude Markovitz aptly observes that such hopes expressed themselves fully during non-cooperation, and even after its abandonment, "they remained linked in the minds of many to the person of Gandhi. They continued to burst forth sporadically during the 1920's, taking the form of localized agitations led by charismatic leaders who were seen as little Gandhis" (142).

Being inspired by Gandhian programme, Moorthy as a 'little Gandhi' was able to transform the mindset of the villagers who called him 'Big Mountain' and 'small mountain'. Gandhi's ideas during the civil disobedience and non-cooperation movements had convinced such young people like Moorthy that religion and tradition held no barrier to political and nationalist movements and in fact these traditions could be invoked to mobilize the peasants to facilitate the social reform. In the novel, religion serves as a link between urban nationalism and the life and thoughts of the peasants. It was appropriate that Gandhi was

introduced as a larger than life image, with the depth of influence he had over the masses and the decisive role he played in incorporating the peasants into the nationalist movement and in transforming the village life.

Raja Rao's treatment of Gandhian ideology is also very much evident in his biography *The Great Indian Way* apart from his fiction *Kanthapura*. Despite his sojourn in France, he was an Indian by heart in his portrayal of Gandhi which belongs to the category of "reverential ideology" (Sethi, 87). However, in the foreword to the novel *Kanthapura*, Rao indicates that the Mahatma had become part of the 'Sthala-purana' of the village, just like Ram or Sita had been incorporated into the legendary histories of Indian villages, only because they had passed by these villages. It is the reason that Gandhi even without his physical presence in the village, had become such a mythical figure, and was given a status similar to that of gods and goddesses. When the carts brought goods to the village fair at Kanthapura, pictures of the Mahatma were mixed with that of Rama, Krishna and Sankara, testifying to the divine status given to Gandhi in these villages. In fact the novel exemplifies how the nationalist movement used traditional rituals and patterns of religious belief to serve political interests. When Moorthy was very young, he had a vision of God Hari and that holy vision got merged with one he had of Gandhi. It was a magical and reconstructing experience for him because he ultimately became a true Gandhi follower:

Mahatma patted him on the back, and through that touch was revealed to him as the day is revealed to the night the sheathless being of his soul. And he wandered about the fields and the lanes and the canals and when he came back to the college that evening, he threw his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire, and walked out a Gandhi's man. (39)

Here Gandhi's image and effect is obvious which transforms Moorthy and later reconstructs the village life. The change that the village undergoes is mirrored in the narrator, Achakka, who changes from an orthodox naïve Brahmin grandmother to a secular and open-minded narrator and can easily connect with her readers, even when her belief in Goddess Kenchamma remains unwavering. Apart from Achakka, many peasant women irrespective of their caste and class, are inspired by Gandhi's political call for freedom. As Madhu Kishor observes "While for the mass of women it meant spinning and weaving, the well-to-do women were exhorted not only to give up their foreign finery but also to don Khadi, which purified both the body and soul" (282).

Gandhi's concept of 'Sarvodaya' finds its repercussions in his attempts to include the pariah community into the mainstream, introduction of spinning wheel and rejection of foreign clothes. Gandhi's much acclaimed Dandi march against the new salt law and the subsequent Civil Disobedience movement are the main historical events which parallel the

many incidents in the novel *Kanthapura*. The women like Rangamma and Ratna represent the newly awakened Indian rural women inspired by nationalist fervour under Gandhian movement. Though Gandhi himself believed that non-violence is the inherent quality of women and as they sacrifice for the family in the same way they can learn to make sacrifices for the country. Even though they had never met Gandhi but a awakening transformed the women of Kanthapura too, and it was the result of Gandhi's miracle working through Moorthy. These women were the first to follow Moorthy when the 'Don't Touch the Government' campaign began. As Rangamma cries out against the colonizers:

Now, sisters, forward! and we all cry out, Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai! And we deafen ourselves before the onslaught, and we rush and we crawl... We move on and on, and the lathis rain on us (149).

In this way, Gandhi as Moorthy inspired the women of Kanthapura and many other villages to break the shackles the of age-old orthodoxy and superstitions courageously and transform themselves into "something that the urban intellectual can easily understand and empathise with" (Shingavi 95).

Gandhi's intervention in the nationalist politics monopolized by urban elite as the 'movement of manoeuvre' was important to include the peasants into the national movement. This inclusion was essential to give a new shape to the movement, a sense of whole scale participation, which would help in the negotiations with the Britishers. In *Kanthapura*, this 'moment of manoeuvre' is highlighted with the political mobilization of peasant women and untouchables, exercising the name and guidance of Gandhi. The dull and illiterate village society got a rude shock and underwent a drastic change with the advent of Gandhism in their turmoil. This change was spontaneous and natural especially in the case of women who whole-heartedly participated in the village movement to get freedom. As the narrator Achakka points out:

But how can we be like we used to be? Now we hear this story and that story and we say we too shall organize foreign cloth bycott like at Sholapur, we too, shall go picketing cigarette shops and toddy shops, and we say our Kanthapura, too shall fight for the Mother (23).

What Shahid Amin remarks in this context about the influence of Gandhi on every person is true "Gandhi, the person, was in this particular locality far less than a day, but the Mahatma as an idea was thought out and reworked in popular imagination in subsequent months" (Amin 1988, 289).

II

Among the 'trio', Mulk Raj Anand has also been heavily influenced by Gandhi as is pronouncedly reflected in his novel *Untouchable*. The main protagonist Bakha, being influenced by Gandhi is curious to get a glimpse of the Mahatma. As the novelist narrates "The word Mahatma was like a magical magnet to which he, like all the other people about him, rushed blindly" (126). Bakha, the untouchable, was among the crowd hurrying to see and hear the Mahatma, and he was exhilarated like the rest. They hoped that Gandhi would show them a way out of their oppression. Anand presents their eagerness and expectations vividly as they think that the Mahatma would bring a new dawn to them and rescue them from their condition of indolence and subjection. But Bakha's excitement did not last long because he felt that his caste alienated him from other people as "an inseparable barrier between himself and the crowd" (128). The Mahatma was the only common factor which made the crowd one. Anand presents Bakha's dilemma and his hope for the future in the following lines:

Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody's mind, including Bakha's. Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi. (128)

It is obvious that as in *Kanthapura*, Gandhi is the rallying cry for the masses, the unifying factor for the different sections in the society, including the oppressed and marginalized. It is the reason that Partha Chatterjee has interpreted Gandhi's intervention as the moment of manoeuvre in the long march of the freedom struggle because Gandhi has the mission to gather the masses and enthrall them to ensure their participation in the national movement.

According to Anand, any attempt to weaken the national party would only undermine national unity and consequently India's attempt at decolonization would be negatively affected. So the incorporation of the minorities and outcastes into the national movement was necessary to create a sense of unified India even at the expense of their interests and demands. Anand's novel tentatively offers the solution of technology to the problem of untouchability, but presupposes a liberated nation. National liberation was of primary importance as Gandhi himself had emphasized, "Full and final removal of untouchability... is utterly impossible without swaraj" (61: 166).

But what is remarkable in *Untouchable* about Gandhian ideology is inconsistencies in his attitude towards the untouchables. Due to this, the European educated Muhamadan condemn Gandhi as a hypocrite, a sentiment shared by Ambedkar. The same inconsistencies make Bakha confused when he listens to the Mahatma, only one step away from Krishan's judgement in Anand's autobiographical novel *The Bubble* that the Mahatma is a failure. It is Anand's socialist leanings and his early association with Bloomsbury group that compels him to pass this judgement on Mahatma Gandhi. As Rosemary George remarks "Anand's hope

for a socialist future takes over the narrative and is coupled with a very clear authorial distancing from the Gandhian position on caste” (97). It is obvious that despite the ambiguities in the Mahatma’s perspective regarding caste, Anand could not ignore the image of Gandhi as remained dominant in Bakha’s mind even at the end of the novel keeping in view his involvement in the national movement.

III

R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*, though published after independence in 1955, is a fictional text in which Gandhi appears again as a dominant character. Like Raja Rao and Anand, Narayan was not politically involved in the freedom struggle and mostly remained confined in his South Indian town Malgudi. Though the novel is set in the Malgudi town but the sedate world of Malgudi encounters turmoil and disorder with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi. The transformation that the main protagonist Sriram undergoes is a manifestation of this turbulence which is indicative of the profound changes that happen at the national level. Narayan presents the exposure of remote villages of South India to Gandhian ideals through the minor events that happen in the life of Sriram. These personal incidents are linked with the events of national significance like Gandhi’s social and political activities apart from ‘Quit India Movement’ and the Gandhi’s assassination.

Like Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the national movement is depicted through the perspective of a single character. In *Kanthapura*, the main protagonist is not significant in himself but only in relation with the movement. But in Narayan’s work, the national movement serves the interest of the protagonist as Gandhi is a means to fulfill Sriram’s dream of marrying Bharati. It is the reason that he becomes active under Gandhian influence as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out “in the familiar setting of Malgudi Sriram sleeps and eats, sits in his arm-chair, and walks smugly in his circumscribed universe, until suddenly he wakes up in a different world when the Mahatma and his followers came to his town” (48).

Though the narrative moves through Quit India Movement to India’s independence and partition to Gandhi’s assassination historically but highlights Sriram’s changes in Gandhi’s presence. Sriram’s small world is juxtaposed with the vast canvas of Gandhian nationalism. He encounters the larger world during a train journey to New Delhi, on his way to meet Bharati. He is surprised to meet so many different people, speaking different languages and in this way gets a glimpse of the nation and its diversity. That crowded, congested compartment while traveling becomes a miniature of the Nation but Sriram is not particularly thrilled by his experience. What Narayan seems to suggest ironically is that an awareness of the nation is not always an exhilarating experience in comparison to Sriram’s own transformation to Gandhian methods. According to Priyamvada Gopal “the novel does take the question of personal transformation seriously as its protagonist attempts to evolve

from Malgudi delinquent to Gandhi-man and eventually, dedicated citizen of independent India” (56). This change is obvious in the beginning when Sriram was influenced by Gandhi for his personal purposes but later on he became Gandhian and is unhappy when Gandhi leaves his village as “the thought of having to leave a mundane existence without Mahatmaji appalled him” (72). This proves the Mahatma’s image and his unique ability to reach into the hearts of the people and transform them even inactive persons like Sriram.

However, the main thrust of the novel is on the humanistic ideals rather than the political and Narayan also uses comic irony to give a new dimension to the characters and events. Though with the realistic presentation of events and people, Narayan does not only focus on Gandhi’s political activities but also on Gandhi’s role as ‘Mahatma’ and his relevance in personal relationships.

Thus the fictional narratives of Raja Rao, Anand and Narayan have not only captured the image and role of Gandhi who was the main inspiring force behind the mass movements but also his personality as ‘Mahatma’. Situated in the context of these insurrections, their novels foreground the multiple dimensions of the national movements and the germinal impact of the Gandhi. Though in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Anand’s *Untouchable*, Gandhi’s socio-political relevance is narrated and accordingly his image distinctly established whereas in Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*, his role is affirmed adequately on personal level. However, the rare political prodigy of Mahatma Gandhi and his socio-cultural acumen in uniting the masses, as reflected in these select novels, make his role heroic apart from his altruistic and humanitarian nature as father of a nation which is still a model to decipher the riddle of life and contemporary national issues of the world.

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