



Negotiating the Gandhian Notion in the Current Indian Literary Milieu

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Abstract

It is a well-accepted fact that the continual interest to discern Mahatma Gandhi as a philosopher, writer, motivator, and a leader has been a source of interest in the academic arena. The article aims to enunciate how the variegated positions that Mahatma Gandhi held help us to negotiate the Gandhian notion in the current scholastic realm. A cursory reference to debates about Gandhi is made to illustrate the significance of Gandhi in the colonial and post-colonial context. The act of looking back provides an insight into how writings about Gandhi and writings by Gandhi play a significant role in Indian literary scene which in other words proves how Gandhian thought, Gandhian political and social ethics remain a much discussed subject even in the postmodern times.

Introduction

The continuing importance of Gandhian philosophy, Gandhian ideals and ethics can be deciphered with the amount of discussions that have been undertaken locally and globally. Endeavors to write about the influence of Gandhi in India; be it as leader or a writer or a reformer is not a novel idea. Much has been said and written about this great man which bears out that Gandhi is still with us and also hints that Gandhi as a person is too elusive to be acquiescent for an absolute sketch and any attempt to do so would be far from complete. This fact proves that lot more things can still be explored about

Gandhi. Why do we read Gandhi? How do we understand Gandhi the man, Gandhi the leader, Gandhi the Saint? How does literature portray him? How does literature change our estimation or add on to the already evolved image of Gandhi? Questions such as these are undertaken, to understand the approach to Gandhi by today's generation, to whom Gandhi maybe a concept, an image, or a metaphor to strengthen the unity of the nation. The reception of Gandhi as a subject, as a leader, and as the saint calls for conscious scrutiny whether his ideas or precepts is taken seriously with fresh deliberations or is it just an echo of the past appraisal. Indian history of English literature covers the growth and development of Indian writing in English. In this vast canvas called Indian writing in English how do we locate Mahatma Gandhi as a writer? How do writers present and discuss Gandhi?

Literature on Gandhi shows us that each period has understood him differently. The pre- independence era was occupied by a Gandhian wave socially, culturally and politically, at least in the period from 1918-1922. Today he is seen as an image, a concept, a symbol an avatar. The notion we have about Gandhi is formed by what we have heard or read about him. Historic narratives more or less record the strivings of Gandhi to free India from the despotic imperial rule. His egalitarian mission is well substantiated as it was not restricted to any country, race, caste or creed; it was meant to free mankind from any kind of subjugation. He extended his empathy to the bereaved which is evinced in his fight for the rights of the South Africans. Hindu philosophy believes in the emergence of avatars, so it believes Gandhiji to be an avatar. Gandhi's reaction to imperial, religious and cultural hegemony though not in Gramscian terms was to uncover how the oppressive structures and exclusive interpretations were a hindrance to social change. His approach to communalism becomes important for cultural transformation in the current context as it provides a religious base in the true sense of the term. Gandhiji's countering of communalism was in support of having a new hermeneutics of scripture

and philosophy wherein he tried to reformulate the religious tradition in new ways in saying “if you read the Koran, you must read it with the eye of the Muslim; if you read the Bible, you must read it with the eye of the Christian, if you read the Gita, you must read it with the eye of a Hindu”(Gandhi 420).

Articulations about Gandhi in the academic arena raise interest to discern Mahatma Gandhi as a philosopher, writer, motivator, and a leader. His non-violent methods drew the attention of the world and Gandhi’s ideals have touched the global table. The wide spread popularity that Gandhi had in the foreign lands is a known fact but some important facts can miss our attention, John Haynes Holmes’s a promoter of Gandhi’s ideas, a clergyman, candid orator, and a pacifist of First World War set forth the sermon titled “The Christ of Today” which was broadly disseminated. In a sermon called “Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today?” (1922), his deliberations of Gandhi amazed many listeners who were unfamiliar with Gandhi. Gandhi’s autobiography was first published in America in the magazine Unity of which Holmes was the editor. The Power of Nonviolence by Richard B. Gregg first appeared in 1934, which has also seen subsequent revisions. The book has seen its popularity owing to the fact that no other book on non-violence has been so widely read by U.S. pacifists, or used as a basis of a study program.

Krishnalal Shridharani’s War without Violence 1939, was a priceless elucidation of the methods of non violent direct action. These are proof enough to show how writers have perceived the presence of Gandhi in the world political scenario. Muriel Lester, Travelling Secretary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, an English friend of Gandhi began a series of lecture tours in the U.S. her discourse on Gandhi to groups outside the traditional peace ranks, concentrated on vivid accounts of Gandhi’s nonviolent undertakings. The Quakers, the Unitarians were drawn to Gandhi because of mutual

interest in religion and righteous rejection of violence. The nonviolent option around which the Gandhian thought is woven has influenced many academicians, political thinkers, social activists, reformers and visionaries, academicians and literary writers. These instances are only to show that Gandhi as a subject moves beyond the trajectory of Indian writing.

Gandhi as a subject in Indian literary studies

Indian writing in English is an expressive body of work which endeavors to locate Indian writing in English within the social cultural and political fabric of India. The writings of Gandhi have always gathered attention in the academic arena in the post-independence era. The reference to Gandhi in the works of renowned writers is another reason why Gandhian thought, ideals and political ethics remain a much discussed subject even in the postmodern times. We also notice that our reading of Gandhi alters our perceptions of him, he played the role of a catalyst; he brought about catalysis in Indian literature. Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar seems quite justified in considering Gandhi as an influential force for writers of the time. Mr. M. K. Naik comments, "Indian English fiction discovered some of its most compelling themes: the ordeal of freedom struggle, east west relationship,...the problem of the untouchables.. the oppressed" (Naik124) such observations affirms Lionel Trilling's remark on Gandhi, "for our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination"(Naik 124)

The image of Gandhi as the father of the nation is set in the minds of every Indian and this reflection is apparent in many novels, short fiction and plays. His letters, essays, have informed us about the self and the nation; in it we look for the self in us and the nation in reality and the nation as we imagine. His essays are a self-exploration of Gandhi himself but also invoke the reader for a judicious analysis. His thought had its roots in his Hindu ideology along with this we find numerous influences, thoughts

of Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, and others. But his greatest dynamism lies in his sheer sincerity and see-through honesty. It is possible to differ with Gandhi's views on several contentious topics such as language problem in India or education or caste but it is impracticable for any reader to finish reading anything written by him and go away unconvinced. Modern India is obliged to Gandhi because his political, social and religious ideology emerged from the very Indian context and believed in ancient Indian wisdom as a powerful tool to fight against the colonial monopoly.

Through his writings, mainly his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* (1927) Gandhi unequivocally disclosed his inadequacies, his weaknesses, and flaws like any other ordinary human being. But he is different from the ordinary folk in overcoming his shortcomings through his resolute will power and unremitting effort to evolve as a man of the millennium. Nehru's essay, "And Then Gandhi Came" mentions how Gandhi was successful in winning over friends and foes by his spontaneous flow of love and compassion. His prosaic narration in his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, London diary and *Discourses on The Gita* elucidate the lucidity through which he presents the facts of life. He recounts the true instance of his life and how he developed his concept of active nonviolent resistance, which propelled the Indian struggle for independence and countless struggles of the 20th century. As a biographer, he assumes the role of a portrait painter and an historian, and he endeavors to discover and chronicle all the important events that might have changed the destiny and molded the self, and the social and cultural pattern of the people. The narrative moves from the personal to the political from the private to the general thereby proving how personal endeavors infuse larger aims in life which is beyond the realms of the family, the self, and the kith and kin. His arguments about his actions both in personal and political circumstances are elucidated in a lawyer like fashion. This technique clearly illustrates the objectivity through which he analyses the precepts of his

political and social life, leaving the reader to evaluate and scrutinize without the interference of the author.

His estimation of the English language (as well as literature produced in English) in the post independence India outlined in his Hind Swaraj (1909) rightly cautions the seekers of the "Swaraj", about the toxic brunt of the pre-eminence of the English language on Indian culture and society, in so doing he sought to set the schema for the so-called postcolonial and cultural studies in English, in India. This proves that the impact of Gandhi is beyond the story bound depiction of his own image and philosophy. All these are instances to show that Gandhi is included in the academia as a writer, as a subject, as an icon, and as an image. As a writer he paved the path for innovation in prosody, linguistic and stylistic gradation which can be reckoned as uniquely Indian in style and diction, and is a clear instance of re adaptation and transformation of the established Anglo forms of writing. His prosaic style of narration, textual interplays, even though being absorbed in Indian content can be read as post-modernist, as writings show instances of pastiche, shifting of literary forms and choice of diction. Today in the post modern era writers talk of breathing Indianness' in matters of subject and style as a revisionist strategy in Indian writing in English, but Gandhiji started this typically Indian approach in the colonial period and reached all corners of the sub -continent across the linguistic frontiers. In so doing he laid the foundation for a new-fangled direction in writing which would free India from the colonial dominance.

Intellectual freedom is important for any thinker, writer, or philosopher. Through his writings, Gandhi candidly directs all the marginalised nations to espouse a native tradition which is not tampered by the influence of the west. The desire to speak on their own behalf with the stories of their land and culture

and their own histories is actualised in his writings. Today we have indigenous nations fighting for a space of their own through their writings. They represent a site where indigenous writers achieved freedom in self-expression. Current literary studies include World Literatures in the academia; World Literatures as a subject is simply a way of saying second language and in practical terms, it means other than English. All this proves that Gandhi was a visionary who had perceived the world as moving beyond the zones of familiarity of the English language much before the post-colonial thinkers or it would not be an overstatement to call him the harbinger of postcolonial thought. If analysed decisively we realise how the contemporary postcolonial literature in Indian writing in English represents the people's struggles, dissent, elation, optimism, sufferings, dreams, successes, defeats, and worldviews. We also see how the social, political, cultural spiritual ideas and aspirations mark their identities. 'Postcolonial' is an umbrella term that can cover a whole set of assorted positions. Thomas King, native Canadian writer states "postcolonial purports a method of analyzing literatures which are formed out of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer" (184-5) post colonialism of Canada and New Zealand or Australia may not be the same as India.

The common factor which links them is that all their writings have been the product of European invasion and their means of colonisation leading to the erasure of their indigenous cultures. In Australia and Canada, the English colonised the land and the people and these countries had oral tradition, so complete adoption of the English language was easy. But in India complete erasure did not happen because of written scriptures and a leader like Gandhiji. It is worthwhile to remember how Raja Rao's famous "Foreword" in *Kanthapura* (1938), which is an instance of a great novel of Indian nationalism from below, problematises the role of an Indian writer in English the spirit or the idea of India that Raja Rao wants to address is related to the relationship between literature and freedom and it

is the same idea that Gandhij wants an Indian writer to address. Looking from the below in the colonial India meant looking from the subaltern's perspective to establish an idea that was essentially Indian not something that was Anglo Indian.

In *Kanthapura*, we see the centre holding the parts together; it is Gandhian ideology and faith in religion which sustains Moorthy's faith. Gandhism in *Kanthapura* embodied through the character of Moorthy, is one of the strategies of the narrative. It deals with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s, the participation of a small village of South India in the national struggle calls for the story's central concern, as in Jayanta Mahapatra's most moving postcolonial poem "Requiem". The eloquence through which Mahapatra presents his feelings of the man who he adored and through whose humanitarian ideas he grew up with is noteworthy but we also surmise that his attitude is not without ambiguity. Mahapatra's poetry creates its own consolation, which is clear when he says: "What you have left behind are / faded pictures on bare office walls." Mahapatra sanctifies Gandhi as Raja Rao does in *Kanthapura*. The image of Gandhi as a sanctifier continues to loom large in the writings of the post-independence and postmodern times. *Kanthapura* discusses colonialism and its consequences, but we also notice how the post-colonial inclinations are reasonably evident. And it is mainly perceptible in the efforts of the people for creating national myths to decolonise the mind of the people of *Kanthapura* which is a minor equivalent of India itself. For instance the simple actions including the clash against British colonialism at the Skeffington Coffee Estate, clearly depict decolonisation in process. "Kanthapura can very easily be placed at the center of Gandhian literature for depicting truthfully and artistically the upsurge of Gandhian movement" (qtd. in Raizada 38) The novel is a striking example of the impact of Gandhian leadership and value that affected even the distant Indian villages and also an instance of what Dayal observes "predominantly political in inspiration" (9)

The literary works of Gandhi or Raja Rao shows neither Gandhi nor Raja Rao as a conservative nativist or cultural chauvinists; they are quite liberal and non-violent in their approach. They expect the writers to work for the realization of sahyik- sanskritik swaraj or stimulating decolonisation in India in its widest sense which is a prerequisite of being an equal partner in the era of globalization. Being indifferent to this fact we may foresee the danger where Indian culture and India will continue to be stereotyped by our own postcolonial theorists and writers in their works as a "dark continent" with a salient yet closed "heart of darkness"(Chakrabarti) for the consumption of the metropolitan western/westernized readers. Post colonialism, as Simon Daring, states is the self-determining will of the decolonized people to defend their culture from western dominance. James Clifford's "newly, traditionally" or categories such as hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence were notions that laced colonized into colonizing cultures. This also makes us comprehend how post colonialism has become effectively a mollifying anti-colonialist category.

The end of the two world wars marked the process of decolonisation marking the end of European hegemony. Western bourgeois view dates back to the works of Nietzsche and later Rudolf Pannwitz author of the Crisis of European Culture, 1917 and Oswald Spengler author of the Decline of The West, 1918. All these works trace the beginnings of post colonialism but when we talk of Indian literatures and Indian cultural and social scenario we can trace how sparks of post colonialism dates back to the freedom movement in India. Gandhi was a Hindu political leader dreaming of making India an ideal nation; he breathed the sense of collective consciousness not only in India but in all nations which were under the imperial rule.

Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph's *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays* (2006) is an attempt to weave Gandhi into the postmodernist texture. This volume of essays is born out of a deep admiration for Gandhi. No doubt it endeavors to show Gandhi as a postmodern thinker but we can't ignore Gandhi's idea of self is his idea of the nation which is essentially different from theirs and is far removed from postmodern idea of self without a center. Indian interpreters and thinkers might not agree with the postmodern thinkers questions of morality and politics which cannot be reduced to a mystical notion of a postmodernist acceptance. These instances show western theorists' responses to Gandhi which speak of the relevance of Gandhi in current debates which is not limited to Indian literary studies alone but moves beyond.

Literary writings about Gandhi show how the people of India were caught in the hypnotic spell of Gandhi which had the power to release them from alien dominance. Gandhian theme is prevalent in *Waiting For The Mahatma* (1955) and in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935). Gandhi is idealised as a leader who extends his helping hand to uplift the downtrodden. While the former looks back into the colonial era to enliven the experiences of the people's struggle during the colonial period. The latter tackles with Indian caste issues that were resultant factor for a divide in the Indian society. Raja Rao elevates the Gandhian movement to a mythological plane and displays his fascination for Indian metaphysical tradition. *Kanthpura* is just an example to show how freedom struggle touches a remote village in India. Reading texts such as these helps today's generation to understand Gandhi's principles as a leader. Teaching Gandhi or reading Gandhi will alter our views of Gandhi in response to what some current reactions might evoke among youngsters. For example, Arundhati Roy while investigating Ambedkar, Gandhi's debate on caste found Gandhi's empathy condescending as Gandhiji fervently opposed Ambedkar's offer for separate electorate for the Untouchables. (Roy 2104).

Roy highlights his antipathy toward the Kaffirs (black Africans), his efforts to distinguish himself from the “Indentured Indians,” and his aspiration to be recognized as a part of Britain’s “imperial brotherhood.” The racist and castiest accusations of Gandhiji was refuted by Tushar Gandhi, (grandson of Gandhi) as baseless and estimated such moves of Roy as an attempt to seek public attention. Prof Mridula Mukherjee felt Roy’s critique was misleading and she estimates that both Gandhi and Ambedkar worked to stop caste oppression in different ways and both were sincere in their efforts. It is not that Gandhiji is beyond censure severe denigrations have been hurled in the past and continues to the present but the result is that he still tops the graph. In his own life time, he faced dissent and was denied by many people but the image of Gandhi as the Mahatma, as the godly man has not altered but has reinvented him. Visual literacy has contributed much to keep Gandhi alive, “we have media articulating on the subject Nine hours to Rama” filmed in 1963, Gandhi film by Richard Attenborough 1982, , a critique of some of Gandhi’s ideologies, “My Father” 2007, and the recent one “Gandhi Godse Ek Yudh” 2023 movies show how Gandhi has been a favoured character.

Current perceptions of Gandhi and writer’s gradation of Gandhi for or against are significant facts that strengthen our views of him as a sincere national leader. The educated Indians today who are taught western ethics and deliberations often presage Gandhi and his intentions. For a person, who was so preposterously straight about his sensual trials, distorted elucidations might have been pretty common. Debates on Gandhi, whether they materialise from the passage of the academic world or from the political or social arena, one can position them as falling into categories such as an ardent rendition and an autopsy. Gandhi becomes all things to all people, his analysts have analysed him as traditionalist, modernist, feminist, socialist, communist and so on. These varied interpretations are all studied to understand Gandhi which dish up to gain a comprehensive perception. In the academic

arena, much has been written and critiqued about Gandhi in the past and continues even in the postmodern era with Shashi Tharoor's (The Great Indian Novel, 1989) writing on Gandhi which established Tharoor's name in postmodern English literature. All this validates the ongoing discussions on Gandhi which proves the formative influence and charismatic aura his presence has created in the Indian literary and nationalistic scene. All this is substantial enough to evoke simple truth that Gandhian thought is not lost amid an intellectually egotistical game of scholarship. Literary responses to Gandhi as a leader, writer, saint, serve to show the need to let a dialogic and effervescent learning atmosphere which motivates learners to be self-reflexive, and ask newer and insightful questions to make sense of the present times.

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