



Research article

Representing Gandhi: A Study of Mahatma Gandhi as a Character in Selected Novels from Colonial and Post-Colonial Times

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Abstract

The 1930s saw the rise of Mahatma Gandhi as the frontline leader of India's struggle against the British imperialists, and it was also a decade when the Indian novel in English came of age, with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* within a few years of each other. The English novel in India grew as a consequence of the English education introduced by the British, and it was used as a weapon against the imperialists by a bunch of young men who were primarily educated abroad, with an aim to use a universal language that addressed all Indians all over the world. Gandhi, unsurprisingly, became a great source of inspiration for these writers. Gandhi has been a subject of literature and other forms of art to this day, but the portrayal of the 'Great-soul' (as Tagore called Gandhi) has gone through a change since the pre-independence days. This essay analyses the change in the portrayal of Gandhi by close-reading four novels, *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938) from the colonised period, and *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *Dhorai Charit Manas* (1950) from the post-independence era. The essay shows how the portrayal of Gandhi and Gandhism went through a change in the novels from the colonial period to post-colonial times, as the reverence and deification of Gandhi that was so prevalent in the novels of the colonial time gave way to a more humane portrayal of the most influential leader of India's freedom struggle.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi; Indian fiction in English; Mulk Raj Anand; Raja Rao; R.K. Narayan; Satinath Bhaduri; Indian freedom struggle



1: Introduction

Nationalism, or national sentiments, more so during a country's struggle for its independence or decolonisation, leads to the making of many "leaders" or "heroes" to whom the common people look up. They seek a way to proceed towards their desired goal, which is of making their country

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free from external rulers, and expect their leader to show them the right way forward. But they also seek a purpose for their movements. They seek inspiration. Leaders are important for the common people for perhaps these three basic reasons– survival, purpose, and achievement.

In a country as layered, as varied, and as diverse as India, a land where the population is more than a Billion and the number of practiced languages and religions clock into thousands, one needs a personality par excellence to emerge as a national leader. Someone who would cut into the apparently strong barriers between each different group of people – groups of religion, language, caste, or ethnicity, among others. A man who could take a Hindu and a Muslim and a Sikh and a Jain under the same umbrella. A man who could inspire a Tamil-speaking Brahmin from the South and a Santali-speaking peasant from the East at the same time and on the same issue. And a certain Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi achieved that.

Gandhi, who rather made a career out of leading freedom movements and campaigns – his contribution to freedom struggles against the Europeans spanned 50-plus years and three continents – was successful in inspiring not only his own countrymen but people all over the world. His revolutionary ideas and principles of non-violence and truth force (Satyagraha), along with his drive against untouchability and emphasis on inter-religious and inter-caste harmony won over millions of admirers across the globe. On top of these was the idea of simple living and high thinking. Gandhi believed “our ultimate capital is not the money we have, but our courage, our faith, our truthfulness, and our ability.”¹ In a nation where people were deprived of most basic necessities, and starved of a real rationale for life, the advent of Gandhi gave them a purpose to live and fight for their livelihood. His connection to the people and his revolutionary principles meant it was just a matter of time before he became a demigod in the eyes of the people. He was, then, an avatar of Vishnu, the “supreme god” of the Hindus, of Rama, and of Krishna, and yet he was a god-like figure to the other religions as well. And he became the “Mahatma” – the great soul.

The 1930s saw the rise of Gandhi as the frontline leader of India’s freedom struggle as well as the establishment of the Indian-English novel, which was mostly written by people educated and living abroad, who came back in the wake of India’s freedom struggle. Most of these writers were heavily inspired by Gandhi’s philosophies and his fresh approach to the freedom movement. They wrote their novels against the backdrop of some real contemporary events of the freedom movement and issues of the society, made their characters follow the Gandhian principles and some even introduced Gandhi as a character in their novels. This vogue of introducing the real man in a fictional milieu, which could be said to have started with Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, continues to date in not only novels but in other forms of arts as well, including Cinema.

But while Gandhi continued to inspire and influence writers even after India’s independence, the depiction of Gandhi as a character in fiction has seen a change, or a shift, after decolonisation, and Gandhi’s death. In a sense, India’s new dawn came with the end of Gandhi’s life, and the two have almost become synonymous. The novels during Gandhi’s life, and thereby, the pre-independence era show Gandhi and the implications and practice of the Gandhian philosophies in their full glory. In them, Gandhi has been glorified, deified, and mythologized, with people being all accepting of his ideals and philosophies. But the novels written after independence have him

in a more humane light – he is no more the demigod, the absolute leader, whose philosophies see absolute success, neither do people follow them blindly.

Through this paper then, an attempt would be made to understand this change in the portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi as a character in fiction before and after India's independence, along with the representation of his philosophies and their acceptance among the people, with the help of four novels written during the freedom struggle, and after independence (and Gandhi's death), like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, and Satinath Bhaduri's Bengali novel *Dhorai Charit Manas*. The study will be done purely with the help of textual analysis and close reading of the texts and with some assistance from postcolonial theory to discuss the implication of the change along with the changing narrative of India as a nation-state.

2: Gandhi in Fiction Before Independence

This section will look at the depiction and portrayal of Mohandas Gandhi in fiction during his life, and in effect, before India's independence through two novels - Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. The novels in themselves are of mighty importance. Both are regarded to have established the Indian English novel. The birth of the English novel in India was a result of the English education that was introduced by the British colonisers in the mid-19th century and the upsurge in the freedom movement in the early 20th Century. This period saw the emergence of a generation who were beneficiaries of the English language education and many of them were even educated abroad. This latter group of men not only studied in European universities but also stayed there post their graduation, but returned to India to serve in the freedom movement in some way or the other. Most of these men were heavily influenced by Gandhi's ideologies, and some of them went on to write literature based on Gandhi's principles and ideas. Anand and Rao were two of the chief architects of not only Indian-English literature but also Gandhian literature. Their choice of English as a language was an attempt to bind and unite the vast country of India, comprising people of more than 20 distinct languages. But having said so, it is important to notice the Indianisation of the British language to support their Indian stories.

Writers of such great eminence as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan – regarded as the great trio of Indian English Fiction – included aspects of Gandhian philosophy in their various novels, and all of them have written a novel where Gandhi makes an appearance. But the more interesting difference between the three - or, more specifically between Narayan and the other two – is the fact that Rao's and Anand's novels were written while Gandhi was living and the freedom movement was at its peak, while Narayan wrote his novel some years after Gandhi's death. Anand met Gandhi and consulted him, apart from staying at his ashram and cleaning the latrines, before writing the version of *Untouchable* we know today.

The first draft of *Untouchable* was written in 1930, and the protagonist Bakha was modelled on one of Anand's childhood friends. But Anand's "wide and desultory reading were to have their bearing on the novel".² When he found that his novel had become more of an imitation of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), among other European books, he left the novel at that, and it was only after reading about a sweeper named Uka in one of Gandhi's writings (which impressed him so much

that he included the incident in Gandhi's half-fictional speech in the novel) that he decided to come back to India, meet Gandhi and discuss his novel with him. He met him, stayed in his ashram, and reworked the novel heavily, after which the present form came into place. The story chronicles a day in the life of the untouchable Bakha who cleans latrines (or public toilets) for a living. Throughout most part of the novel, Bakha is seen to be in a dilemma, in a crisscross between two worlds. These two worlds seem to be the confusion of Modern India – having a desperate attempt to cling onto its past as well as a desire to grasp modernism. Bakha, who has previously worked in the barracks of the British, is unable to fathom why his own people refuse to touch him or talk to him while the foreigners had no problems. This indirect jibe at the Indians on the part of Anand can be traced to his heavy influence on Gandhi's notion of eradicating untouchability. While the British may treat the Indians harshly, they do not seem to possess prejudices and ill feelings towards anybody based on the lines of caste.

The book is written in a simple language, "but it has form", as Cowasjee says. We see a structure that is quite akin to that of a three-act play – the rising action, a climax, and the dénouement. The novel starts with Bakha carrying out his work. Being an untouchable, he is forced to walk on the public road by alerting people of his arrival – "posh posh, sweeper coming" (Anand 46). But the joy of buying some sweets during the day makes him forget his announcement and he 'touches' a man on the street. This creates a ruckus and casts a shadow on all his subsequent happenings. It is at this point that the novel starts taking the form of a propaganda piece. The second half sees a series of possible solutions to the problem of untouchability that persists even today. We see three sets of solutions for the eradication of untouchability – the first is that of the Salvationist missionary: Jesus Christ, or Christianity. While Bakha is impressed by Christ's equal treatment of all men, he quickly loses hope when the missionary cannot tell him who Christ is. The act of changing one's faith would not end the problem anyway, and it is here that Anand introduces Gandhi into the novel. He comes as the second solution and as a more practical one. And it is only when Bakha sees Gandhi that his acute sense of pain and separateness is alleviated. "This first sensation of equality, of oneness, a feeling of being more than an animal comes when Bakha hears Mahatma Gandhi speak at a public meeting. For the first time, Bakha feels human, and (and at least tentatively) a part of one people, one community, one nation" (Bhattacharya xiv). The third solution after this, mouthed by a poet, seems to be the doing of Anand the communist – the fact that no God, no sacrifice, no abnegation is required to help the people, only a simple machine of flush system would do. But then, this solution becomes a kind of anti-climax after the Mahatma's speech, and for Bakha, as he goes on to think about whatever he heard and understood, perhaps imagines a world in the future which will have a proper balance between the views of Gandhi and that of the poet.

Nandini Bhattacharya in her introduction to the *Longman Study Edition of Untouchable* writes,

Gandhi acts as much a real historical figure as an idea, a symbol of hope and change, which all sections of people – so long divided on lines of caste, class, and religion want desperately to cling on to, so that they may forge a new identity, and 'imagine' a united nation. (Bhattacharya xiv)

Anand here, then, is speaking of Gandhi not just as a flesh-and-blood man but Gandhi who is the idea of transformation and hope. Before he arrives, Bakha starts believing that it is only Gandhi

who can break these seemingly rigid barriers existing among the people. "Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi" (Anand 128). For the people in general, he is a divine figure, "a saint... an avatar of the gods Vishnu and Krishna" (Anand 128). There are talks "that a spider had woven a web in the house of Lat Sahib at Dilli, making a portrait of the sage, and writing his name under it in English... And they said that no sword could cut his body, no bullet could pierce his skin, no fire could scorch him!" (Anand 128) He is expected to "teach us the true religion of God-love which is the best swaraj." These kinds of deification can also be seen in Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*, where the face of "Gandhi baa" can be seen in a pumpkin, in a pot of water, and his name is written on every single stem of a bel tree. This mythologizing of Gandhi in terms of Hindu deities was largely considered to be an act of the Indian Congress Party, as part of their anti-colonial strategy, an attempt to encourage and inspire the common man by working with their sentiments, and also a case of implementing ideology. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

also depicts this process of deification, where Jayaramachar, the harikatha man introduces Gandhi as the new god, framing the anti-colonial struggle in the eternal ethical struggle between the asuras and Gandhi, the new avatar of Vishnu, who appears in a new form every age to protect the good and destroy the evil.

Gandhi's speech in *Untouchable* is part fiction, part real. It is drawn from different real speeches and writings of Gandhi. He begins his speech by saying that he will stick to his propaganda for the harijans and not carry out anything against the British, which is a condition laid by the rulers before setting him free from gaol. Throughout the speech, he speaks about how untouchability is "the greatest blot on Hinduism." He cites references and anecdotes – one about a scavenger named Uka, about which the real Gandhi wrote in one of his papers – and says how he himself does the work done by the Untouchables and finds no shame in doing them. He finishes his speech by announcing, "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 does not understand everything that Gandhi says but catches the essence of it nonetheless. He seems to be offended also at one point when Gandhi asks the untouchables to do their part by purifying themselves by giving up bad habits and drinking. But his thrill is back when he ends his speech by demanding that all public places including temples and schools be opened to the outcasts. Saros Cowasjee sums up Gandhi's speech (as portrayed by Anand) - "Anand sees Gandhi's genius lies, not in his doctrines, which are often inconsistent, but in the uncanny way he can feel the pulse of the people and win them over." (Cowasjee 168).

Anand portrays Gandhi as a man containing extreme power. He sums up Gandhi's mass appeal in one single line: "This strange man seemed to have the genius that could, by a single dramatic act, rally multi-coloured, multi-tongues India to himself." But Anand's portrayal of Gandhi's physicality acts as a kind of opposite to the extreme power he possesses. In Anand's words, Gandhi's head is 'dark', 'clean-shaven', and 'well-oiled'. He does not wear a 'solar topee' which would have bestowed a sense of power, like the British rulers. He is the 'half-naked fakir', who, as Ved Mehta said, "...wanted to wear or use only what was within the means of any peasant, however poor" (quoted in Chatterjee 212). But it is in this appearance that he becomes Anand's "The Great Little Man." As Niladri Ranjan Chatterjee writes,

There is nebulosity, an amorphosity about the personality of Gandhi which resists not only any kind of binarist or identity labelling or fixing, but also continually frustrates physiognomy deductions. It is interesting that in the course of a single paragraph Anand detects 'something Mephistophelean in [Gandhi's] determined little chin' yet finds 'something beautiful and saintly in the face' (Chatterjee 212)

While Gandhi appears as a character physically in Anand's novel, he does not in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, but has a sort of all-pervasive and omnipresent appearance. Rao even once considered naming his book "Gandhi and Our Village" and the influence of "The Great Little Man" is evident throughout. He is like a God to Moorthy, the disciple, who guides his village people into the struggle against British rule following Gandhi's footsteps by participating in the Satyagraha, operating the charkha, discarding British clothes and untouchability among other things. The villagers start following Gandhi's ideas as God's message and Moorthy as one of his apostles – his message-bearer. R. Parthasarathy writes in his introduction,

He [Moorthy] is... a Gandhian and committed, like Gandhi, to ending British rule as well as the inequalities within Indian society as untouchability and oppression of women. The Gandhian movement was based on Satyagraha ('firmness in truth') Gandhi added an ethical dimension to what was basically a social and political movement. The Gandhian bias is obvious: moral revolution takes precedence over social and political revolutions. It is significant that Moorthy enters the untouchable's house in his own village first, before his imprisonment as a revolutionary. While the inspiration of the novel is moral and humanistic, its idiom is spiritual and religious. Stress is laid on such values as righteousness, love, non-violence and on ritual beliefs and practices. (Parthasarathy xiv-xv)

Like *Untouchable*, the people in *Kanthapura* believe, too, that Gandhi is an incarnation like Lord Ram or Lord Krishna, who came to establish righteousness, thereby making the Satyagraha a religious ritual:

...there was born in a family in Gujrat a son such as the world had never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the kingdom of the sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against enemies of the country... and his voice was so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom, that men followed him, more and more men followed him as they did Krishna the flute player; and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule (Rao 13).

Kanthapura is the story of how Gandhi's struggle for independence from the British came to a remote village in southern India. Under the influence of Gandhi, social protest becomes, on the one hand, "a movement to reform the inegalitarian Indian society and, on the other, a movement to end British colonialism" (Parthasarathy xiv). *Kanthapura* has been variously called a Gandhi epic. Though it does not have him as a character, the novel portrays Gandhi's influence on the average Indian during the freedom struggle - the Mahatma's permeating, pervasive influence runs among the villagers throughout the novel. Rao's format of the novel can be said to be inspired by the Hindu epic Mahabharata, where Gandhi is Lord Krishna – someone who influences a war greatly, guides his people, but never actively takes part himself. The timeline of the novel captures all the

major political activities during Gandhi's peak period, like the Dandi March which began the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Non-Cooperation movement (the villagers in the book refuse to pay taxes to the government), the formation of a Congress Committee in the village (as it happened during those times, with Congress workers visiting the remotest of places and creating a party) and Gandhi's visit to attend the Second Round-Table conference and his pact with the English Viceroy. Moorthy lives his life like Gandhi - he observes fasts, carries movements to eradicate untouchability, and promotes the use of Khadi and spinning. The villagers start considering him as the 'village Mahatma' quite literally ("you are our Gandhi" (Rao, 86)). The whole novel is scattered with slogans like 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!' and 'Moorthy ki jai!' - Both taken almost in the same breath. However, C. Paul Varghese says,

Unlike Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao does not make his novel an instrument of propaganda, but with considerable restraint, he makes it a creative work of fiction whose virtues are not casual and accidental, and which, therefore demands concentrated reading. Raja Rao does not make the mistake of introducing Gandhi directly as a character in the novel. However, he exploits for the purpose of his novel the Indian people's faith in the charismatic leadership that Gandhi offered them.

3. Gandhi After Independence

Many of R.K. Narayan's novels deal with Gandhian philosophies and Gandhian politics, with characters living on Gandhian principles, like Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. But none of his novels are as political as *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Like *Kanthapura*, it also dwells upon the theme of how the freedom movement was transformed into a mass movement, attracting youngsters, but the narrative extends to the assassination of Gandhi.

Waiting for the Mahatma is the story about an ignorant and aimless youth, Sriram, and his transformation into a disciple of Gandhi. Like many of Narayan's protagonists, Sriram is an imperfect character in the beginning, achieving perfection at the end. His initial pull towards Gandhi is due to his interest in a girl, a member of the *Sevak Sangh*. When Gandhi visits *Malgudi*, Sriram attends his meeting only to see the girl, Bharati. Sriram ultimately decides to join Gandhi's movement just so that he can be with her. Geoffrey Kain is quoted by Piciucco,

Sriram becomes drawn into Gandhian activism only through his passion for Bharati; in order to be closer to her, becomes one of the *Satyagrahi*. Ironically, his physical passion (which he scarcely keeps in check) and his love-obsession (which hardly qualifies for *swaraj*) leads him, ultimately, to become serious in his commitment to self-denial, self-control, and a deep sense of service. (Piciucco 426)

Mahatma Gandhi is a central character in this novel, but it is debatable whether he is the protagonist or not. Unlike in *Untouchable*, Gandhi enters the scene in the first act itself. His entry reminds one of the entry scenes of a movie star in a film, thus creating an aura for the rest of the novel:

Now a mighty choral chant began: Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, Pathitha Pavana Seetha Ram, to a simple tune, led by a girl at the microphone. It went on and on, and ceased when Mahatmaji began his speech. (Narayan 27)

Gandhi's speech covers almost all of his principles and ideals, starting from urging the people to devote themselves to God and non-cooperation with the British government, to non-violence, and eradicating the practice of untouchability. The novel proceeds to show how Gandhi rejects the comfortable mansion of the Municipal Chairman, and instead stays in a slum of an untouchable. For some time, Sriram is totally engrossed in Gandhi's speech but his decision to follow Gandhi's procession was only because of his interest in Bharati. His first encounter with the Mahatma also happens due to that lady, who insists on meeting him only in the presence of the man: "...if you wish to meet me come to Bapuji, the only place where you may see me" (Narayan 61).

Gandhi's role is given a focal point at this junction. His concept of voluntary poverty has been duly represented in this part of the narrative. Gandhi stays in a hut meant for untouchable sweepers, and he imposes on his followers that they must stay with him as well. Sriram goes to meet Bharati (and in effect Gandhi), and the 'Great Soul' asks Sriram to accompany him on his morning walk along with Bharati. Though, it is not before he has made the youngster take "a vow to wear only cloth made out of your own hands each day." During the walk, Gandhi positions himself in between Sriram and Bharati. And it is then that Sriram expresses his wish to join Gandhi's campaign, and, impressed by the young man's spirit, Gandhi agrees.

Gandhi as a character physically disappears after the first part, only to come back in the very last portion, but his presence is felt throughout. After Gandhi's departure, Sriram becomes more devoted and committed to his task assigned by Gandhi. He relocates himself to a deserted shrine on a slope of a hill. He would walk to the remotest village and preach Gandhi's ideals and programs, most importantly "Quit India." He teaches the children of the villages about Gandhi and the ongoing freedom movement.

In a sense, Sriram's transformation from a lost and aimless youth, lusting after a lady to a dedicated social worker and devotee to the country's freedom movement following Mahatma Gandhi's footsteps parallels the real life of Gandhi himself. It may be remembered that Gandhi himself rose from a youth plagued with extreme lust and carnal attraction to a life led by vowing celibacy and becoming the most influential and powerful personality in the nation's freedom movement.

Unlike most of his contemporaries though, Narayan does not limit his novel to a document of only one aspect of the freedom struggle. A few days into his life as a Satyagrahi, Sriram seems to be influenced by the extremists. Sriram's refusal to accept Gandhi's direction of surrendering to the police along with Bharati leaves him alone (as Bharati follows Gandhi's words and is jailed), and falls prey to Jagadish, an extremist freedom fighter. This happens largely due to two reasons – first, he starts suffering from melancholy after Bharati's departure, and second, Jagadish succeeds in convincing Sriram that he and Bharati are friends and he will bring him her news. Narayan, in this way, seems to portray the freedom struggle as a whole, by depicting the struggles of not only the moderates but also the extremists.

But then, this phase of the novel lacks the finery of the Gandhian track and ends up being a foil which only helps in highlighting the dominant Gandhi narrative. Sriram is ultimately imprisoned on the ground of terrorist activities. Sriram converts the jail into a platform to discuss Gandhian philosophy with his inmates, and in a few years, is released without levying any charge. By that

time the British have left India and he finds a letter from Bharati informing him that she is in Delhi along with Gandhi's other people.

The love story and the story of the freedom struggle merge at the end. Bharati and Sriram finally get the consent of Gandhi for marriage, and he even agrees to perform the rituals himself. He assures the young couple that he would carry out the ceremony of their marriage the very next day and then proceeds to a prayer meeting. Here the novel ends in a sort of anti-climax. Gandhi, before proceeding to the stage says to Bharati,

Bharati, I have a feeling that I may not attend your wedding tomorrow morning... I seem to have been too rash in promising to officiate as your priest (Narayan 253)

The novel ends with Gandhi's assassination. This gives rise to several possibilities about the marriage as well, whether the end of the Mahatma applies to the end of the love story, and whether Narayan planned it purely as a political novel, commenting on the kind of freedom we achieved after so many years of bloodshed.

The portrayal of Gandhi in this novel has drawn polarising reviews, with many criticising the humane appearance of the man while many appreciating it for the same. Also, his portrayal as a possible priest of marriage has raised eyebrows. But Gandhi in this novel seems to be a proper human being. He is no more an idea, a symbol, but a mere political leader. Written seven years after Gandhi's assassination and India's independence, Narayan did not need to write a political tract in the garb of a novel. He had the liberty and the subjectivity to fictionalise the freedom movement, keeping the historical events intact. Therefore, it does not read like a propaganda piece, but proper historical fiction.

Another novel written after India's independence and Gandhi's death, and covering a different group of people in a different part of India is Satinath Bhaduri's Bengali novel *Dhorai Charit Manas* (translated into English by Ipsita Chanda in 2013). The title is a derivation of the ancient Hindu epic *Ramcharitmanas*. The style too loosely follows the pattern. Chanda in her preface comments,

...it is important to point out the differences in language between the titles of the chapters, the nomenclature of the different sections which all follow either the pattern of *Ramcharitmanas*, or the archaic and dated language that is used in speaking of the epic hero and episodes in his life, or both. The actual hero is, by contrast, a poor rural youth, Dhorai himself. Satinath conceives of him as the prototype of Rama, human yet rising above his human limitations if the occasion demands... (Chanda xi)

Here, it may be observed that critics have found parallels between the lives of Rama, the epic hero, and Mahatma Gandhi. As Ramachandra Guha observes in *Gandhi Before India*,

There are some striking resemblances between the central character of this story [Gandhi] and his counterpart in the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. The hero of that story, Lord Ram, also travels long distances, sometimes willingly, at other times unwillingly. He too spends long periods in exile and has a loyal and very supportive wife, whom (like Gandhi) he does not always treat with the respect and understanding she deserves. He is also a man of high moral character, who occasionally entertains dark and dangerous thoughts. Both Gandhi and Ram have

powerful adversaries, who are not without a certain appeal of their own. Both men could not have done what they did... without the self-effacing support of very many others. And both have enjoyed a vigorous and contentious after-life (Guha 7).

Towards the end of *Dhorai*, a character says, "Mahatmaji is the avatar, reincarnation, of Ramchandraji" (Bhaduri 285).

Dhorai Charit Manas spans a period of some thirty years and covers some of the most turbulent phases of the history of the freedom struggle, more specifically, the years marking the emergence and establishment of Gandhi as a leader of the masses, and also, like *Kanthapura* and *Waiting for the Mahatma*, how the freedom movement took shape into a mass movement among villagers. And unlike the other three novels discussed here, this novel is set in an eastern India village near Purnea in Bihar. By linking important political events to the static rural society, Bhaduri tried to show how the dynamics of political convulsions have affected this ossified society. The author describes the wonder and curiosity of the illiterate people at their first contact with 'Ganhi baba',

"Who's *Ganhi baba*?"

"*Bada guni aadmi... Ganhi baa* is *parhej* from *maas-machli*, he has renounced meat-fish and intoxicants. He hasn't married. And he goes around completely naked." (Bhaduri 31)

Like in *Untouchable*, the people in *Dhorai* give rise to several myths and deifications of Gandhi. The people see the image of "*Ganhi baa*" on a pumpkin, on a water pot. "The leaves of the topmost branch of the huge bel tree shimmer – three leaves on every single stem. It seems that something's written on each of them. Surely *Ganhi baa's* name" (Bhaduri, 38). Indeed, "he is such a great saint whose heart cries out even when the mustard plant at the corner of the courtyard is smothered by a broomstick" (Bhaduri 223). He is "*Gandhi bhogmaan*" (Bhaduri 223).

Bhaduri includes mass movements such as the non-cooperative movement and the Dandi March for salt Satyagraha. And then the narrative follows the 1937 provincial elections. And it is for this event that the Congress workers visit the villages. During that election, for most of the Hindu-mass, 'vote' for 'Gandhiji' became a symbol of patriotism, plus, obviously, a hope for socio-economic change; the hope to bring in *Ram-rajya*, the reign of Ram, for Gandhi is an incarnation of Ram.

Under the influence of Gandhi, *Dhorai* responds to the call of Satyagraha, but, the titular protagonist goes through an eventful political life, like Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, and like the latter, he too, moves away from the Gandhian way to an extreme guerrilla band named Kranti Dal. But unlike Sriram, *Dhorai* does so because he is exposed to the hypocrisy and elitism among the Congress party. But he is disillusioned there as well. For most of this rather voluminous novel, Gandhi has a wide, God-like presence, but never do his philosophies and ideals enjoy absoluteness. We come across the several events Gandhi led but never a picture of how his ideals were followed in the processes. Ultimately when the man himself appears towards the end, he is nothing more than a passing presence. The characters in the novel express their disappointment at Gandhi's short speech after a heavy build-up: "So much hullabaloo and commotion for so many days. Then *lay halua!* What a letdown! Mahatmaji's tamasha finished in just three minutes" (Bhaduri 227). Even Gandhi's speech is represented in passive voice, through *Dhorai's* reception

and perception of it. While he seemed blissful on hearing the man and his talk on various topics, he is visibly confused, and upset at Gandhi's reasoning for the recently occurred earthquake. Gandhi's talk about the untouchables and the ill-treatment they face does not connect with Dhorai. This portion seems similar to that in *Untouchable*, where Bakha, like Dhorai, fails to understand certain aspects and portions of Gandhi's speech. This seems to be a real issue that Gandhi's philosophies and ideals. They failed to reach the illiterates and the remotest people; they looked confined to a certain class, a certain section of the public. Also, the ideas Gandhi preached himself, and the ideas (of his) that were carried around by his volunteers had a huge gap between them.

4. Comparative Analysis

From the above discussion, we can deduce that the change of the common people's attitudes towards Gandhi, and Gandhian philosophies, have been represented in the literature of the times. Novels written before independence (and, in effect, during Gandhi's life) have the Mahatma in a God-like appearance. In both *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura*, Gandhi is a lot more than a flesh-and-blood human being. He is more of an idea, a symbol, an ideal, and an imagination for the perfect India that the people hoped to achieve after independence. The people are seen accepting his principles and philosophies almost blindly and going to every extent to follow them. But the novels written after independence (and Gandhi's death), show Gandhi in a more humane light. In them, he is not a god anymore but a real human being, just a mere political leader, as we see in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The blind faith in his ideals and absolute success by following them is also missing, as in *Dhorai Charit Manas*.

The novels of the 1930s and 1940s were deeply stirred by the vast upheavals beginning to take place in Indian society. The events leading to India's independence were inspired by Gandhi's precepts and practices. Also, these decades were important because of the rise in the Indian-English novel, which aimed at the unification of the people of India and inspired them for participating in the freedom struggle. It may be the reason why the novels depict Gandhi the way they have. The tragic failures of Gandhi became clearer during the late forties, and more so after the independence and the partition of the country. The novels after independence, therefore, provide a more complete picture of the freedom movement and of Gandhi himself. They forego the propagandist nature of the novels of the thirties.

In Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, published in 1935, Gandhi touches the innermost part of the protagonist's soul, and for the audience, it is only the Mahatma who can make the people "one" by breaking the barriers between them. He is the symbol of 'hope and change'² which people, divided and separated (and suffocated) on the lines of caste and religion, want to embrace. The people rush to listen to his speech destroying plants and gardens, as if,

The word 'mahatma' was like a magical magnet to which he [Bakha], like all the other people about him, rushed blindly... they hurried by... it was as if they knew, by an instinct surer than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilisation must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately,

brutally trampling on a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape to Gandhi. (Anand 126-127).

In *Waiting for the Mahatma* (published 1955), we hardly see any of this frenzy, even though there was a 'huge gathering' to listen to Gandhi, which sat 'uncomplainingly' (Narayan 24-25). Narayan presents Gandhi not in terms of great events, but through daily, ordinary events. "He showed how ordinary people with no pretence to any idealism reacted to this great man" (Mukherjee 48). Unlike Anand, whose novel depicts a fictional, hypothetical event, Narayan's novel "were interwoven with such historical incidents as Gandhiji's struggle for Indian independence, the Quit India movement, and that fatal evening of 30th January, 1948, when the great devotee of non-violence fell a victim to the assassin's bullets" (Mukherjee 45). Narayan introduces Gandhi as the saint, the Mahatma, inspiring veneration, and worship, but develops his 'character' as an ordinary leader. Even though he appears just twice in the novel – in the first part and the last scene – he overshadows all other characters. But then, *Waiting for the Mahatma* is not a propaganda novel, unlike *Untouchable*, but a historical one.

Though the title suggests that *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a "Gandhi-novel", the warmth in the appearance and glorification of Gandhi is not there. There is no deification, no mythologizing, unlike the other novels. Here, Gandhi is a mere human leader who practices what he preaches, and one who is possessive about his disciples but loves them as well, so much so that he agrees to act as the priest in one of his disciple's marriage ceremony. He is not an idea, but a flesh-and-blood mortal who is killed by a bullet (contrast this with the line in *Untouchable* – "...no sword could cut his body, no bullet could pierce his skin, no fire could scorch him!"³). He is there not just standing on a pedestal, but someone who takes a walk with other people, and talks to them as a normal human being. Here, Gandhi's failure to spread his ideals and notions to the remotest of people, and even among his disciples lay bare, which we find again in Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*, unlike in *Kanthapura*.

In *Waiting*, Gandhi's disciple Sriram loses his way as a Gandhian, and gets involved with extremist groups, apparently for personal reasons, but also because his education in Gandhian philosophy was not strong enough. Something similar happens with the protagonist of *Dhorai Charit Manas* (1949; 1951) as well, where Dhorai dissociates himself as a follower of Gandhi and joins a guerrilla band. The latter does so after he becomes aware of the hypocrisy and elitism present in the Congress party that endorses Gandhi's philosophies. He also becomes disillusioned after hearing Gandhi's short speech where it seems to him that Gandhi is mistaken about the real reason for an earthquake. Dhorai feels the quake was a result of the 'sins' of the rajputs and the village headman, but Gandhi addresses the unfair treatment of the untouchable. Here it may be noted that one of the important areas where Gandhi was severely criticised was regarding his campaign against untouchability and the abolition of caste prejudice. Notable among his critics was Dr. Ambedkar, who persistently accused Gandhi of advocating hypocritical reforms that preserved all the evils of the caste system⁴. Here, the novel also points to Gandhi's limitations in promoting universal education among the countrymen important benchmark for social development.

This failure of Gandhi's philosophies is not covered explicitly in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Published in 1938, at the peak of Gandhi's Swadeshi movement, this novel about a small South Indian village symbolises India in miniature. A perfect example of a nationalist novel, Gandhi himself does not

appear in this novel, but has an omnipresent appearance through his alter-ego Moorthappa. Moorthy, a city-educated youth brings Gandhism to his village, and preaches as well as practices all of Gandhi's philosophies. He lives a miniature life of Gandhi in his village and succeeds in uniting his villagers, especially women, to stand against the British. Unlike in *Waiting for Mahatma* or *Dhorai*, the people do not get disillusioned with Gandhi's philosophies, and there are no distortions in the carriage of Gandhi's messages. The villagers' struggle in Rao's novel succeeds in breaking the shackles of society-defined prejudices and boundaries and shows the absolute success of the Gandhian philosophies. Even though later day critics have variously opined how *Kanthapura* has ultimately ended up being a parody of the Gandhian movement and ideology, and what it represents is the failure of Gandhism in disguise, the representation of Gandhi and Gandhism, judging by the contemporary social and political background, is indeed absolute and heroic.

Apart from *Waiting for Mahatma*, all the other novels have, to some extent, Gandhi as a mythologized and deified figure, as an incarnation of some Hindu god or the other. But while the pre-independence novels such as *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura* have the people getting inspired by this avatar of Gandhi, in *Dhorai Charit Manas* (the post-independence novel), this deification amounts to virtually nothing, other than the disillusionment of the other characters.

5. Conclusion

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, discusses how novels have inspired nationalism among the colonised people, and the Indian freedom struggle saw the birth of many such novels in all languages that tried to contribute towards the struggle for Independence. A problem India had was the absence of a common language, a standardised language as Anderson says, which all the members can understand. Literature in general, helps in developing a collective, unified mindset, but this problem of language could be solved only with the help of, ironically, the language of the foreign rulers, and of course, the national leader.

Most of the novels written during the freedom movement based their stories on the theme of freedom struggle, and on the philosophies and ideals of Mohandas Gandhi. Two of the very first mainstream Indian-English writers Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand were self-confessed Gandhians and they based many of their novels on Gandhian ideologies. Anand even introduced Gandhi as a character in his novel *Untouchable*, and while Rao does not introduce Gandhi physically in *Kanthapura*, his presence can be felt through the protagonist Moorthy who is 'Gandhi in miniature' - someone who not only brings Gandhi's philosophies in his village but leads a life that parallels Gandhi's. In both these novels Gandhi has been portrayed in a glowing light. He is glorified to an extreme limit, even deified. The people look up to him in awe and extreme reverence, and he is more of a mythical hero than a mortal being.

A few novels written after independence also had Gandhi making an appearance, like R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*. Both these novels cover the freedom movement and Gandhi's influence in turning a political movement into

a mass revolution, but interestingly, Gandhi's portrayal in these novels is a lot subdued. While the people in *Dhorai* do deify Gandhi when they first hear of him and his activities, the wonder and admiration are not absolute, and even Gandhi's speech fails to generate any impact among the villagers. In *Untouchable*, the people believe that it is only Gandhi who can create India into "one nation," nothing of that sort happens in *Dhorai*. *Waiting for the Mahatma* on the other hand takes a completely different route, and portrays a Gandhi who is a mere political leader in possession of great power. A contrast can be drawn between the protagonists of *Kanthapura* and *Waiting*, where both are part of Gandhi's *sangh*, but their fates are completely different from each other. While Moorthy comes across as a reflection of Gandhi, Sriram loses his way as a Gandhian and gets involved with an extremist group. The reverence and absolute nature of Gandhi's portrayal in *Waiting* like in *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura* is almost absent, and so is the deification and mythologizing.

A possible reason for this difference could be the time. *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura* needed to be written that way, to inspire people and instill in them the nationalistic sentiment. They needed to be the propaganda that they are. Also, written while the struggle was still on and the man was still alive, the writers lacked the objectivity and the detachment required to cover all bases, an advantage the novels written after Independence had. *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *Dhorai Charit Manas* did need not be propaganda as they did not require instilling nationalistic sentiments among their readers. They did not need to be propaganda novels, but simply historical novels – a document of a time gone by. That is why both these novels blend real events with fiction, all the while commenting on the political scenario of the period they covered. Both these novels have protagonists who lose their way as Gandhians and join extremist groups, largely because of the inadequate preaching of the ideologies and also because of dichotomies present inside the parties. By covering the activities of guerrilla groups, both novels tried to show the freedom struggle in its entirety and not just a fraction of it.

Representation of Gandhi in fiction has continued over the years. Over the last few years, it has moved beyond novels, and in the last few years he has featured predominantly in various movies – from biographical depictions to contemporary interpretations. Following the award-winning Hollywood biography, there have been numerous Indian movies that have depicted Gandhi and also discussed aspects of his life and philosophies. People have portrayed not only the successes and positives of Gandhi but his failures as well. In recent years, there have been the hugely successful Hindi movie *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006) and the Gujarati play *Yugpurush* (2016), among many other movies and plays. While the latter is a historical play, depicting the relationship between Gandhi and his guide, the Jain philosopher Shrimad Raychandra and traces the spiritual journey of Gandhi, the former is a quirky take on Gandhism in modern times covering both its positives as well as limitations, and has Gandhi as an apparition who is visible only to a wayward

gangster, who is partially reformed by following Gandhi's principles under the guidance of the spirit.

Even after seven decades of Gandhi's demise, he has remained a force to reckon with. Over the last few decades, many of his philosophies and ideals, which have erstwhile been lauded, have come under the scanner of various critics. Many of his philosophies seem dated and regressive today. His personal life has been no less interesting, and biographical accounts – both fictionalised and factual – continue to be written or made into films at regular intervals. But then, he is "The Father of the Nation", and his contribution to India's freedom movement can never be denied. His philosophy of non-violence resistance has been followed with success not only in India but across the globe, with leaders even today finding inspiration from him. There is no doubt that this phenomenon of a character will keep artists and writers busy for several more decades to come.

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End Notes

1. Quoted by Ramachandra Guha in *Gandhi Before India*, p. 230
2. Saros Cowasjee, 'The Epic of Misery' in *Untouchable*, Ed. Nandini Bhattacharya. p. 168
3. Nandini Bhattacharya. Introduction to *Untouchable*, p.xiv
4. Mulk Raj Anand. *Untouchable*, p. 128.
5. Nandini Bhattacharya, *Untouchable*, p.162

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