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## Gandhi in Indian Fiction

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**Gandhi**

### Abstract

In the twenties and early thirties of twentieth century Gandhi was not the undisputed leader of the masses. There were many who did not have faith in his non-violent non-cooperation movement. But his social reforms like eradication of untouchability and picketing toddy shops and sarvodaya ideals received the attention of one and all. The humiliated and long neglected section of the society at last found one who championed their cause. This article explains how Mahatma Gandhi is introduced into the Indian English fiction in various ways. It also discusses how He appears as a character in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), *The Sword and the*

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*Sickle* (1942) and *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* (1991), KA. Abbas's *Inqilab* (1955), R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). and Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961).

### **Mahatma Gandhi in Indian Novels**

Mahatma Gandhi is introduced into the Indian English fiction in various ways. He appears as a character in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) and *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* (1991), KA. Abbas's *Inqilab* (1955), R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961). Though he does not appear as a character in KS. Venkataramani's *Murugan, the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan, the Patriot* (1932) or Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), Gandhi is the driving force and is represented by idealized characters. Gandhi's followers appear in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* (1947), Mrs. Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1957) and R.K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967).

### **A Leader in Making**

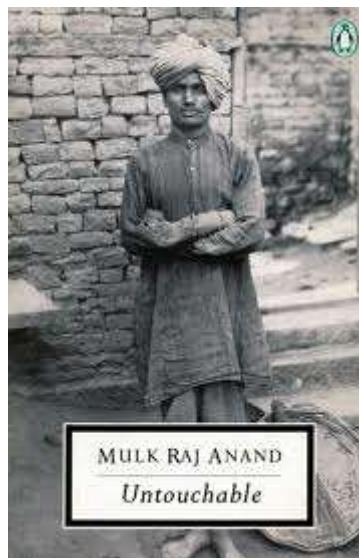
In the twenties and early thirties of the last century, Gandhi was not the undisputed leader of the masses. There were many who did not have faith in his non-violent non-cooperation movement. But his social reforms like eradication of untouchability and picketing toddy shops and sarvodaya ideals received the attention of one and all. The humiliated and long neglected section of the society at last found one who championed their cause. Many Indian English novelists like K.S. Venkataramani and Mulk Raj Anand felt that Gandhi was more effective as a social reformer. This is clearly revealed in their *Murugan, the Tiller, Kandan, the patriot and Untouchable* respectively.

By the late thirties and forties, Gandhi with his successful Salt Satyagraha proved to the world the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle for independence. Apart from his ahimsa, his love of truth and spirit of sacrifice made him the guiding spirit of the Indian freedom struggle. Influenced by him, many sacrificed what little they had for the sake of making India a free country.

### **Mulk Raj Anand and Gandhi**



Mulk Raj Anand introduces Gandhi as a character in *Untouchable*. Anand is objective in his portrayal of Gandhi. He makes the innocent victim, Bakha, listen to every word of Gandhi in rapt attention, with the hope that his misery and humiliation would come to an end. But Gandhi offers no immediate solution. In *The Sword and the Sickle*, Anand shows how Lalu, the protagonist, though impressed by Gandhi's peasant-like appearance and sincerity, refuses to be convinced of the effectiveness of Gandhi's non-violent struggle. Both in *Untouchable* and *The Sword and the Sickle*, Anand questions the effectiveness of Gandhian solution to the problems of untouchables and the peasants.



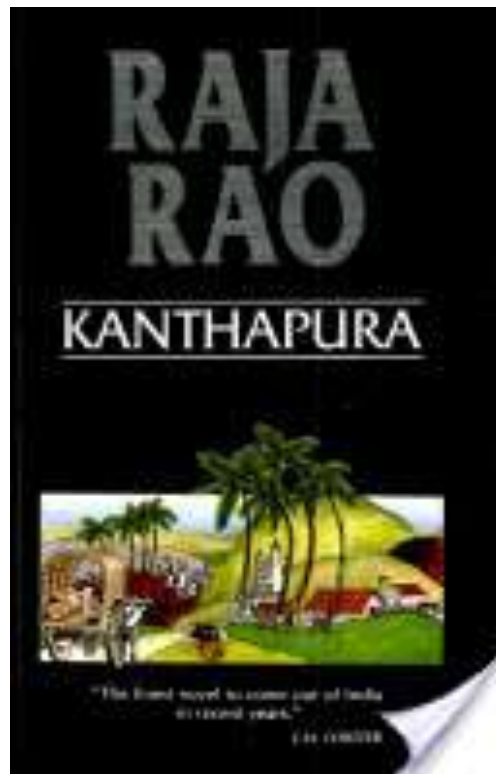
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## Raja Rao and Gandhi

Unlike Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao does not present Gandhi as a character in *Kanthapura*. Nevertheless, he gives a vivid and faithful account of the impact of Gandhi on rural India. The image of Gandhi as presented by Raja Rao is an exemplary image because to him Gandhi is an avatar of Vishnu. For too many people in Kanthapura, Gandhi is the invisible God and Moorthy is the visit avatar. Moorthy's efforts to eradicate untouchability and make the villagers spin weave and wear hand-spun cloth meet with some resistance. But Moorthy slowly succeeds in making the freedom struggle take roots in Kanthapura. The oppressive government uses brute force against the villagers, some of them die and others leave Kanthapura and settle in a new village. Moorthy is drawn towards the Congress activities led by Jawaharlal Nehru. Though Kanthapura is destroyed in the physical sense of the world by the imperialist government, the spirit of the villagers remains undaunted. They believe, "He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be happy."



As in *Kanthapura*, in *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947) also, Raja Rao deals with the fight for India's freedom and Gandhi's impact on people. Gandhi, as in *Kanthapura*, is in the background. On the advice of the Master, the apostle of peace, people stop buying foreign cloth, stop serving the red-men's government and refuse to pay taxes. The workmen build barricades to prevent the army from entering the city. But the Master says: "No barricades in the name of the Mahatma, for much blood will be spilt. No, there shall be no battle, brothers."

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The tense situation appears to make Gauri the cow, the central figure of the short story, sad. Somebody even sees "a tear, clear as a drop of Ganges" running down her cheeks. When the city is about to be assaulted by the red-men's army, Gauri climbs the top of the barricades. The crowd, the workmen begin to chant *Vande Mataram*. Soon, the red-men's army joins the crowd and all of them begin to shout "Victory to the Mahatma, Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" Angered at this, the chief of the army fires a shot and kills Gauri. Then, peace comes back to the people. Gauri symbolizes Mother India. Gandhi always wanted India to be a land of peace with unwavering faith in ahimsa and love every one like a mother with infinite compassion. Raja Rao makes Gauri Verily, the Mother, herself, Bharat Mata, Mother India.

### **Bhabani Bhattacharya and Gandhi**

Like Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya in his novel *So Many Hungers* presents the impact of Gandhi on people through the idealized character, Devesh Basu: A truly Gandhian character—in precept as well as practice. Devesh Basu stands for love, truth, and non-violence. He is called Devata by the villagers. Though more than seventy, he is energetic and always inspired by Gandhian ideology. He runs a school for the villagers. Devata is non-violent both in thought and action. As with Gandhi, his love embraces all. He dislikes the British rule in India but not the British.

Devata is not only inspired but inspiring. Consequently, Rahoul, a budding professor and Kajoli, a peasant-girl, join the liberation movement. After her village is destroyed by the police, Kajoli seeks shelter in Calcutta. As a result of the famine and man-made scarcity, she finds none coming forward to help her and her mother. Finally, she makes her grim decision. "She would sell the last thing she owned—herself." At this juncture, she hears the news that Devata is fasting unto death in the prison. Devata's advice asking the villagers not to betray the flag and themselves rings in her ears. Though "hunger-trapped," she decides to be "strong" and becomes a newspaper vendor. She is really "a living tricolor."

While the young Rahoul in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* sacrifices his job for the sake of the country. Sixteen—year-old Raja Raman in Manjeri Isvaran's short story "Between Two Flags," sacrifices his future in response to Gandhi's call. Though Raja Raman is only sixteen, he loves India so much that he does not like the presence of the British in India He refuses to salute the Union Jack at school, He is not deterred by the threatening words of the Headmaster. He has so much faith in Gandhi that he visualizes free India and tells his father: "I salute the flag of my country and the empire for which it stands, with many nations but all one and indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. But his father, a loyal pillar of the alien government, thinks that what Gandhi and the Congress have been propagating is nothing but nonsense. He decides that his son must be put out of mischief's way. So he slaps his son. As a result Raja Raman experiences a conflict of loyalties—loyalty to the Union Jack and royalty to Gandhi. He thinks: It was an insult to our Motherland, an insult to our respect, to go on saluting the Union Jack when our patriots were being gagged and muzzled, beaten and thrown into goals by the white men.

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So, he decides to leave his father, mother and sister and join the freedom struggle. But before he leaves his home, he breaks into pieces the portrait of King George V. He does not return home even after India gains independence. No one knows what the alien government did to him. Nobody knows whether he is alive or not: "But he remains as the deathless symbol of an independent spirit that has won, waving the banner of Free India, singing the song of ecstasy."

### **K.A. Abbas and Gandhi**

In *Inqilab*, K.A. Abbas presents Gandhi as a votary of Hindu-Muslim unity with his unflinching faith in the oneness of religion and as an apostle of non-violence. The protagonist, the young Anwar Au's baptism into Gandhism takes place at the highly impressionable age of eight. Every day, Anwar sits besides his father and listens to the elders talking about Rowlatt Bills, Martial Law, Hartal, Congress, Muslim League, Gandhi's Satyagraha and ahimsa. Of them: "two things instinctively appealed to him—not to obey the unjust laws of the Government and not to kill anyone." He learns from his father the meaning of Swaraj. Thus, Anwar is influenced by Gandhi even before he meets him. He decides to meet Gandhi in spite of his father's newly developed hatred of Hindus.

Gandhi greets Anwar with a smile and asks him to sit down. Anwar does not know how to convey his anguish to the Mahatma. He bursts into tears. Then The *Charkha* stopped creaking and the Mahatma without saying a word, moved towards the boy and put a hand over his head, taking off the fez cap and gently stroking Anwar's short hair. There is such tenderness in his touch that Anwar felt even more helpless and sobbed, violently. 'Oh Mahatmaji,' he cried out between the sobs, 'please do something about these Hindu-Muslim riots. Please! Please! only you can save us all.'

After saying these words, he looks at Gandhi's face and feels relieved: "Now he knew why they called him Mahatma, a Great Soul. On his face was look of such suffering, kindness and pity, as if he personally felt the misery of every single human being." Instead of mocking a whimpering boy, Gandhi gives him an understanding smile. The voice of God or the Inner Voice shows Gandhi the way and he undertakes fast for twenty-one days. The riots immediately stop.

The image of Gandhi as presented by Abbas is objective. He presents an estimate of Gandhi both by his admirers and by people who differ from him. Nehru disagrees with Gandhian theory of trusteeship. Some are angry with Gandhi for supporting the Railway labourers and they call Gandhi 'bania'—seller of flour and pulses. Even Anwar does not approve of certain actions of Gandhi. He wonders why Gandhi does not dissuade people from touching his feet or carries away the dust "sanctified by his bare feet": "Anwar found his earlier feeling of exultation considerably chilled by the religious aspect of the Mahatma's Satyagraha. Perhaps, this is the view of Abbas also.

### **R. K. Narayan and Gandhi**

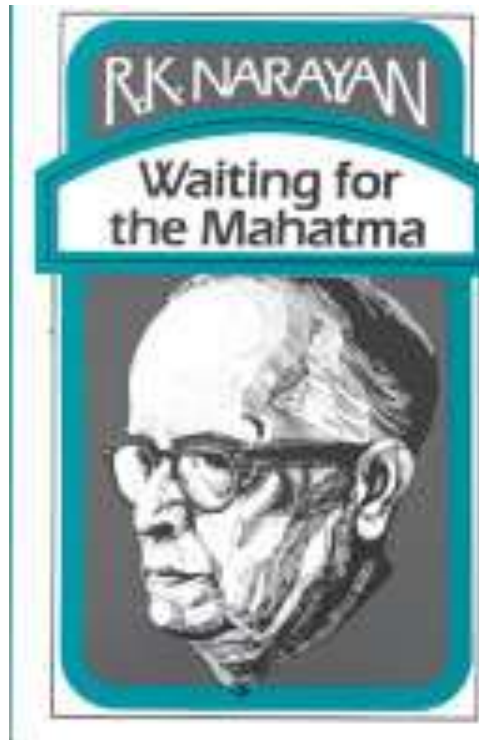
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While Gandhi appears only in a few scenes in *Inqilab*, he appears more prominently in R.K. Narayan's *waiting for the Mahatma*. Narayan's Gandhi loves truth and children, enforces discipline. lives with the untouchables, preaches non-violence, stays where people are suffering and inspires people to take part in the freedom movement. He sees an untouchable boy on the premises of the Municipal Chairman's spruced up bungalow.' He immediately goes to stay in the colony of untouchables.

Gandhi once again comes alive when he refuses to attend the Independence Day celebrations. Instead, he goes to Calcutta where fresh riots break out because his "place was where people were suffering and not where they were celebrating." Followed by Bharati and others, Gandhi visits villages affected by communal riots. He consoles the victims of riots. He forbids everyone to refer to anyone in terms of religion as Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs. He pities the perpetrators of the crimes. He asks Bharati to take care of the children who have lost their parents in the riots. The children are given the names of flowers and birds and no one knows whether they are Muslim children or Hindu. Thus Narayan presents an exemplary image of Gandhi.

But Narayan's intention is to show Gandhi's impact on the average Indian and to present an ironic portrayal of the response of some persons to Gandhi's teachings. Sriram, the protagonist, does not know the difference between Subhas Bose and Gandhi. He becomes a follower of Gandhi so that he can be near Bharati, the foster daughter of Gandhi, whom he loves, He weaves, wears hand-spun cloth, reads the Gita and takes part in the Quit India movement in his own way. When India becomes a free country, he feels proud of himself because he has contributed his mite to the freedom struggle. The timber-contractor has Gandhi's portrait in his

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house, donates five thousand rupees to the Harijan Fund. But he does not apply Gandhian ideology to daily life. As he is afraid of the authorities, he attends the loyalist meetings. The Municipal Chairman spends a lot of money in welcoming Gandhi. But he belongs to the group of people who want to raise their stock by staying close to *the* Mahatma.

If Sriram in '*Waiting for the Mahatma*' becomes a follower of Gandhi for the sake of the woman he loves, Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* becomes a follower of Gandhi because he ardently desires to be revered as a follower of Gandhi. Gandhi's speech at Malgudi explaining the real significance of human action and service inspires Jagan. As a result Jagan joined the movement for freeing India from foreign rule and gave up his studies, home and normal life and violated the British laws of the time. Neither the beatings from the police nor the successive periods of prison life ever touched him when he remembered that he was performing service.

He goes on chanting the name of Babu day in and day out and always tells others that every action of his is influenced by Gandhian principles. He spins every day for an hour and wears hand-spun cloth. He wears only "ahimsak chappals"—sandals made from the hide of animals that died a natural death.

However, Narayan soon reveals the true colours of Jagan: "His reminiscential mood slurring over the fact that he had failed several times in the B.A., ceased to attend the college and had begun to take his examination as a private candidate long before the cause of Gandhi.' He pulps the left-over sweets back and fries them afresh in a new shape. When he sees a hungry vagrant begging for a handful of rice, he thinks that vagrant is a disgrace to the nation because the latter is not begging for public cause. He hoodwinks the tax officials because "Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere." Like Gandhi, he renounces everything, but not his cheque-book. Thus, Narayan, the comic novelist, presents the response of certain people to Gandhian ideology in his own characteristic ironical way.

### **Nagarajan and Gandhi**

Like R.K. Narayan, Nagarajan also presents an exemplary image of Gandhi in his *Chronicles of Kedararn*. Like Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Vanchi in *Chronicles of Kedararn* subverts Gandhian ideals to feather his own nest. But Nagarajan presents characters like Nirmala who adore Gandhi and adopt his teachings in their daily life to the last dot.

In *Chronicles of Kedararn*, Gandhi appears in just two scenes. He accepts the invitation of Vanchinatha Sastri, the president of the local Congress Committee and visits Kedararn. Then, he addresses the people and resolves the long-standing dispute between the two Iyengar sects. Nirmala, under the impact of Gandhi, begins to work for Harijan welfare. Later, she gives away all her assets to be used for the uplift of Harjans and joins Gandhi in Sabarmati.

### **To Conclude**

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Thus, a study of the pre-Independence and the post-Independence Indian English fiction reveals that the principal Indian English novelists who were profoundly affected by Gandhi are K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, K.A. Abbas, and Nagarajan. Each of these novelists seeks to present Gandhi in his own characteristic way.

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