

## **Gandhian Ideals in Major Indian English Novels**

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**M**ahatma Gandhi was a staunch upholder of moral uprightness. Most of his disciples were honest, straightforward and indifferent to power politics. They followed his principles, both in letter and spirit. In the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, we have benign and complementary images of the Mahatma. But when independence was achieved and Mahatma Gandhi disappeared from the national scene, things began to change for the worse and people's faith in the disciples of Gandhi began to erode. There was corruption and moral degradation of his unscrupulous followers. As a result, the image of Mahatma Gandhi was badly tarnished. This phase of the diminishing popularity of Mahatma Gandhi has also been presented by some Indo-English novelists. In *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, and *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal we have the expression of this aspect of Gandhian personality.

Khushwant Singh is one of the most celebrated authors of our time. His *Train to Pakistan* was published in 1956. The novel gave a jolt to the whole reading public with its graphic picture of the nation in its most painful and brutal process of partition. The story is set in a village, Mano Majra, situated in the north-western region of undivided India. The country has just won that long-sought freedom. It was a great event for the world history, but it meant very little to the illiterate villagers. Their ignorance is a sort of blessing to them, at least temporarily. They do not know that along with freedom "the country is divided into Hindustan and Pakistan." (Singh 20)

Moreover, the whole country is bleeding with communal enmity and hatred. The villagers have heard of Mahatma Gandhi, but have not heard of Jinnah. Being unaware of communal riots and bloodshed in the country the Muslims and the Sikhs of the village still cling to the ideals preached by Gandhi, even though Gandhi himself was then walking the bloody paths of the riot-torn India of his dream, lonely and disillusioned. In the eyes of the villagers the image of Gandhi is that of a religious man:

Look at Gandhi! I hear he reads the  
*Koran Sharif* along with his Vedas and  
Shastras. People sing his praise in the

four corners of the earth...even the  
English respect a man of religion. (47)

Khushwant Singh holds the Baniya politicians at Delhi (an obvious reference to Gandhi) responsible for India's partition resulting in mass massacres during the early autumn of 1947. He also shows the bias and inefficiency of the administration in handling the unfortunate situation. The author thinks that the massacre and the bloodshed at the time of partition is an irony on the entire Gandhian values of freedom movement. The author attacks the disciples of Gandhi in the government:

Ask anyone coming from Delhi and  
he will tell you that all these Gandhi  
disciples are minting money. They are  
as good saints as the crane. They shut  
their eyes piously and stand on one  
leg like a yogi doing penance; as soon  
as a fish comes near-hurr up. (20)

Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* appeared in 1959. It is a popular love story set against the freedom movement and the war years from April 1942 to April 1943 at Jallianwalla Bagh. Here we have a good deal of people's involvement in the freedom struggle or their non-cooperation with the British.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* is another novel in our purview. It was published in 1975. Here we have a subtle description of India's partition and the riots and the bloodshed that followed. The people of Sialkot had perfect faith in Gandhi's determination to keep the country united. Lala Kanshi Ram cannot even imagine how the partition could happen.

They believed that the freedom was not something that could be achieved through the *tyaga*, the *tapasya*, but it must be snatched from the Britishers. Obviously, the members of this group in the novel had no faith in Gandhi's ideology of 'satya' and 'ahimsa'. They rather hold Gandhi responsible for the atrocities committed during India's partition. The novel begins with the dialogue of a character named Singh who denounces Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence 'as the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards...the greatest danger to this country.' To quote his words from the text:

Gandhi, by weakening the spirit of men, making us all into sheep and cattle, will only multiply the sacrifice. A million shall die, I tell you... a million! For each man who should have died in the cause of freedom, Gandhi will sacrifice ten. That is what non-violence will do to this country. (*A Bend in the Ganges* 14)

Through *A Bend in the Ganges* the author shows how Gandhi's principle of non-violence was bound to fail perilously as it did with the kind of followers he had. A character in the novel says:

In the midst of Gandhi's non-violence, violence persists. Violence such as no one has ever seen. That is what awaits this country; the violence bottled up in those who pay lip service to non-violence. (98)

But the author shows how even the devoted followers of Gandhi, like Gian Talwar in the story, were not, at heart, really brave, not really moral, but were mostly opportunists and cowards for which the movement, in spite of Gandhi, had come to its natural end, soaking the country in a bloodbath.

In the light of these references it is not just to draw the conclusion that the author is recommending violence as a way of life in preference to the Gandhian principle on non-violence. As a creative artist his attitude is very critical and he mirrors the spirit of the age. He is simply exposing the hypocrisy of those followers of Gandhi who pay lip service to non-violence but are really violent in their action.

*Combat of Shadows* is a political novel of Manohar Malgonkar. It appeared in 1962. Here the author has been very critical of the Indian nationalism and the Gandhian ideals. With equal detachment, the novelist focuses on the doubtful actions, motives and idols of both sides. Thus as the theme of the novel we have the prejudice of the ruling Britishers, against Indians, their subject race, and the Indian's consequent hatred for the Britishers. Here, the author, through the story of racial prejudice of Henry Winton, seems to paint the Indian side in a darker dye. Though he is not as unscrupulous as Jugal Kishor, his character is drawn in a more or less similar mould. In the tea garden school he would appoint only Ruby Miranda, an Anglo-Indian girl whom he wants as his mistress, though

She does not have adequate qualifications for being a teacher. Again, he can love her or can keep her as his mistress; but he would not marry her because she is not a pure white girl. Later, when he marries a girl of pure British blood and finds that she is friendly with an Anglo-Indian youth, Eddy Trevor, it is inexcusable for him. He explains to his wife why she should not mix up with Anglo-Indian people. His words clearly reflect arrogance of the ruling class:

It's not a question of liking or disliking them. It's just that they are different from us, the ruling race. (*Combat of Shadows* 14)

*Combat of Shadows* is a real documentary of Indian politics prevailing in the fourth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when our freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was in its highest ebb. It was the time when anything having something to do with the British in India came to be looked upon by the Indians as a political issue, however private or personal it might be. All this made the life of the British in India a nightmare. A small incident in the novel deserves to be mentioned. A rogue elephant appears in the villages. The task of killing the elephant falls upon Henry Winton who was supposed to restore the image of white rulers in the minds of the natives. Winton, with the help of a lame Indian shikari, confronts the elephant but due to the defective cartridges he has to flee away to save his life. He is saved, but the lame shikari is trampled to death.

*The Princess* may be regarded as the best of all the novels of Manohar Malgonkar. Its story is both appealing and objective. In *Combat of Shadows* also we have these elements in fair measure but the melodrama of murder and love intrigues at the end have marred the same. *The Princess* is free of all these evils and the story appeals to both heart and head. Here the popular ingredients of the romance and the adventure, the heroism and the chivalry are beautifully blended together. The author here depicts that phase of our national life when age-old administrative set up was trampled down by us in the zeal of new spirit of democracy with no care for decency.

However, the author does not fail to depict the selfish, the narrow-minded, and the dishonest politicians of the country. Kanak Chand, the son of an untouchable, an earnest devotee of Mahatma Gandhi from his school days and advocate of Gandhian ideals is one such politician. He

hates the rule of the princess and even spits at the name of the 'state people who are in slavery.' (*The Princess* 87) He, despite his being a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and a leader of the Praja Mandal of his estate, behaves most shamelessly with the ruling house. He goes to the extent of indulging in all sorts of slander and blatant lies. He, as the President of the Praja Mandal of the Maharaja's state gives the Maharaja all sorts of trouble. To the Government of India, he sends a series of complaints against the Maharaja. When the country wins freedom, he becomes more powerful due to his link with the Congress as a Praja Mandal leader. He indulges in all sorts of false and highly exaggerated propaganda against Maharaja's private life. The irony of the novel is to be marked here. Kanak Chand, though is a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, is not fair in his private life. In his childhood he could not have even a square meal but now he is in possession of a 'bungalow and a gaddi.' (97) He is a typical Indian politician with all the vices of character.

*Distant Drum* is the first novel of Manohar Malgonkar. It was published in 1960. Here we have a political leader of Congress Party who is a living example of indecency. He visits an army regiment office and demands the military shamiana to be sent to the City Hall garden where the Congress Committee will receive a leader whose visit is scheduled in the city. No army officer including Colonel Kiran, the Officer-in-charge, would have ever heard such requests in the British period. Naturally, Colonel Kiran expresses his inability to lend military property for political purposes. The Congress leader, whose character is moulded in so-called Gandhian values, loses his temper and shouts at the army officer.

It may be a subject of debate and discussion whether the followers of Gandhi were worthy or unworthy. But one thing that is beyond all controversy is that his messages have perennial relevance. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in his address to the nation on the midnight of 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1947 says:

We have often been unworthy followers of his and have strayed from his message, but not only we but succeeding generations will remember this message and bear the imprint in their hearts of this great son of India, magnificent in his faith and strength and courage and humility. (*English Reader* 26)

We agree with Rabindranath Tagore that Mahatma Gandhi is not only great as a politician, as an organiser, as a moral reformer, he is greater than all these as a man, irrespective of his success or failure in future:

Gandhi...is the complete man who is absolutely one with his ideas, whose vision perfectly blends with his whole being.... Perhaps he may not succeed. Perhaps he may fail as the Buddha failed and as Christ failed to wean men from their iniquities, but he will always be remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all ages to come. (*The Visva Bharati Quarterly* 18)

#### **Works Cited**

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