
Research Papers



INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION – THE GANDHIAN PHASE

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Abstract

The Indian English novel did not attain any noteworthy merit or standard at its inception. It was after 1920 that Indian English fiction began to exhibit signs of fictional maturity and wisdom especially after the arrival of the three “founding fathers” of this genre, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Since then fiction writing in India has taken deep roots with numerous writers contributing to it in many and varied ways. The thematic presentation became inimitable. The narrative technique and style had all the elements that go into the making of great prose fiction. Thus Indian English novel was able to stand shoulder to shoulder with any other global counterparts.

The present study is a modest attempt to find out what it was that enabled the Indian writers to present novels with great literary quality, fictional maturity, vision and direction, and how and why it was possible for them to do so.

KEYWORDS:

Gandhian phase; Indian English novel; national consciousness; freedom movement; E.M. Forster; Edward Thompson; Bankim Chandra Chatterjee; Mulk Raj Anand; R.K. Narayan; Raja Rao; Untouchable; Bakha; Coolie; Two Leaves and a Bud; Swamy and Friends; The Bachelor of Arts; The Dark Room; The English Teacher; Kanthapura; nationalism; ASP Ayyar; Social transformation; underprivileged.

The Gandhian phase in Indian English fiction refers to the period from 1920 to 1947. The novels prior to 1920 did not attain any standard above mediocrity. They lacked some of the basic ingredients that go into the making of a novel. Technical craft, artistic modes and realism were conspicuous by their absence in these works. The plot construction was devoid of any organization or unity of vision. Characterization was so weak that the characters turned out to be mere caricatures. The novelists seemed to lean too much

on didacticism and allegory which further stood as stumbling blocks, and checked their path to success. But they acted as harbingers of the great of the Indian English novel that was soon to make its appearance. One favourable aspect of their works was that some of the authors were good narrators of stories. In other words, germination of this powerful form had already taken place but the flowering and fructification as a result of nurture and nourishment were yet to occur.

It was after 1920 that a sudden blossoming of the Indian fiction was observed by many. It was a time when the nationalist upsurge had reached every nook and corner of the country, and touched and stirred the patriotic sentiments of the people. The whole country was in a political turmoil, and the mass-movements for freedom made people aware of their present and their past, and filled them with new hopes for a better tomorrow. This new consciousness started with the end of the World War I in 1918 and its repercussions began to

be reflected in Indian literature. Our “writers were doubly affected by the war because the national consciousness was awakened, and liberty and independence were prizes worth fighting and dying for. This idea became more and more marked as the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi gradually spread over the length and breadth of India.”¹ Then the rapid events of the thirties almost shocked people into self-awareness, and a society inspired by “Indian nationalism as everywhere else partook (sic) social and radical movement, which certainly came in for creative attention in Indian fiction and also in Indian English fiction.”²

Such awareness can be a breeding ground for any fiction. It is, therefore, not by mere chance that the three major Indian English novelists, – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the “founding fathers” of the Indian English novel—appeared on the scene during this period ushering in an era of fictional maturity, vision and direction. “It can be said that they have taken over from British writers like E.M. Forster & Edward Thompson the task of interpreting modern India to itself & the world.”³ In fact, it was during this phase that the Indian novel was blessed with its significant themes like freedom struggle, East-West confrontation, the communal and religious discord, the condition of the untouchables and the landless proletariat, and the economically exploited etc. The novelists of the time set about probing these problems highlighting their causes and remedies based on certain set principles of life.

The tradition of presenting the social portraiture was not something new. It was in fact initiated by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first English novel by an Indian, in 1864. It is a tale where the female protagonist's (Maatangi) romanticism is snatched away and she is made to suffer for her personal revolt against the mundane and immoral life and its shackles. An extremely modern novel of its times – the plot and its message remains socially fresh even in modern times. This tradition of narrating social situations was diversified during the period under investigation giving it a broader view in the context of a global perspective. P.P Mehta confirms this when he says, “...old topics, old technique and old sentimental didactic novels did not disappear. But the realistic novel with a purpose appeared in its own right bringing with it new inspiration, new technique and new vision.”⁴

Thus we find that Mulk Raj Anand's fiction

deals with the need of social transformation. He exposes the humiliating plight of the untouchables in *Untouchable* (1935), the lot of the landless labour in *Coolie* (1936), and the exploitation of the tea-garden workers in *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937). Anand's realism is founded on his unmitigated belief in the need for humanitarian compassion and justice towards the have-nots.

It is not without reason, therefore, that his *Untouchable* narrates a day in the life of Bakha, an unclean outcaste, who goes through a number of humiliations in the course of one day in his life. He is eighteen, proud, “strong and able-bodied”, a child of modern India, who has started to think himself as superior to his fellow-outcastes. The “touching” occurs in the morning, but it follows him like a shadow to torment him the rest of the day. Due to his low birth, his fate is to work as a latrine sweeper. He is a symbolic figure who stands for all untouchables and their sufferings. The novel is a powerful critique of the Indian caste system and it suggests that British colonial domination of India had actually increased the sufferings of outcastes, such as Bakha. Anand later recalled, that the book “poured out like hot lava from the volcano of my crazed imagination during a long weekend. I remember that I had to finger exercise in order to ease the strain on my right hand. And I must have slept only six hours in three nights, while writing this drama.”

Coolie is another story of the underprivileged. It is the harrowing tale of a child-labourer who dies of tuberculosis. The novel gives a chilling picture of a boy, Munno, who at his early stage gets into obscurity of his own existence. He could feel the itch of an orphan and Anand could rightly give a heart-throbbing description of his mental state and his all activities in a unique way. The narrative is really gripping and touchy for an emotional reader. The writer takes the reader along the journey of the life of Munno from his home in a village to a role as a servant in a house, likewise as a factory worker and eventually as a rickshaw driver. Finally he dies of tuberculosis. Anand wants to point out that there is enough of such fringe-line human existence in and around the society but under the pressure of survival of the fittest, these persons are

ignored every day. One clearly remembers the protagonist's agony on being denied the right to answer nature's call. The novel thus goads people into contemplating for a while about the lives of the marginalized who seek nothing but a decent

living. Anand's razor-sharp realism in the novel makes the reader twist in discomfort. This novel of pre-independence era has certainly stood the test of time.

Two Leaves and a Bud is a memorable piece of work by Mulk Raj Anand. In this novel too Anand continues his exploration of the Indian society. The story is mainly about the plight of the labourers in a tea plantation in Assam. Gangu, the hero, is a poor Punjabi peasant. He is pessimistic about his fate, and has to undergo daily insults and exploitation at the hands of his plantation masters and others. His master, a British official, who is an arrogant bully and sadist, tries to rape his daughter. Gangu attempts to protect his daughter from the clutches of his master but he is overpowered and is brutally put to death by him. The novel thus tries to dramatize not only the cruelties inherent in the caste system but also the sufferings induced by poverty. The tea gardens in Assam become a symbol of slavery. Once again, Anand has brought to fore his ire against the atrocities and injustice meted out to people merely on account of their penury and low birth.

During this period, a few novelists tried to project the ideals of Gandhi in order to bring about a better society. For instance, K.S. Venkataramani's *Murugan, the Tiller* (1927) is influenced by Gandhian principles of life. His *Kandan, the Patriot* (1932) also reverberates with the call of the times. Both these novels "promoted the ideals of Satyagraha ... and summoned Indians to work for national regeneration and political freedom."⁵ Another novelist of the time, A.S.P. Ayyar, who is mainly a historical novelist, frequently adorns his narrative in *Baladitya* (1930) with sermons on the evils of caste system, superficial religiosity etc. In tune with the principles espoused by Anand, Ayyar too preaches the need for reform in society

The novels of the period, however, did not always tend to be reformatory in character. A few novelists believed in simply portraying the social situation, especially the social transformation. K. Nagarajan's *Athvar House* (1937) presents the troubles and travails of an old Maharashtrian Vaishnava Brahmin family long settled in the south. "An authentic picture, drawn with great understanding and sympathy, of a social phenomenon now fast vanishing, this joint family chronicle is one of the best of its kind in Indian English fiction."⁶ Dhan Gopal Mukherji's *My Brother's Face* (1921) paints an equally realistic picture of changing India. In this novel, the narrator returns to India after twelve years' stay in

Europe. On his arrival, he is overwhelmed by the changed face of his native land where he notices "the best of the seventeenth century, at war with the best of the twentieth" (p.19). Mukherji's other novels like *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924) and *Ghond, the Hunter* (1929) deal with the themes of jungle and rural lives. His unusual

knowledge of the flora and fauna of the countryside gives pictorial vividness to the descriptions. His delineation of rustic life too is quite noteworthy. However, these novels give the impression that Mukherji wrote with the intention of catering to the foreign readers' quest for knowledge of India.

Mulk Raj Anand also deals with rural life. His trilogy – *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Water* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) – is about the rural life in Punjab depicting the life of the Sikh peasant, Lal Singh. Anand attempts to recreate incidents and episodes of his childhood to lend realism to history.

With the publication of his first novel, *Swami and Friends* in 1935, R.K. Narayan began his series of Malgudi novels enriching and endowing the Indian English literature with a new dimension in the portrayal of social scenes. He is a gentle crusader who admonishes the wrong doer, laughs at irrational beliefs and superstitions, admires the do-gooder, gives courage to the feeble-hearted and tickles the reader into submission. *Swami and Friends* revolves around ten-year old Swaminathan, a boy full of innocence, wonder, and mischief, and his experiences growing up in the fictional town of Malgudi. He is a student at the British-established Albert Mission School, which stresses Christianity, English literature, and the value of education. Life changes dramatically for young Swami when Rajam - a symbol of colonial power - joins the school, and becomes his close friend. Swami portrays the growing pangs of a boy who despises school, as he makes excuses, and roams around Malgudi with his friends..

Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) delineates the transition of an adolescent mind into adulthood. It revolves around a young boy named Chandran, who resembles a typical Indian upper middle class youth of the pre-independence era. First, Chandran's life in college in the late colonial times is narrated. After graduation, he falls in love with a girl. But the marriage proposal is rejected by the girl's parents since his horoscope describes him as a manglik, a condition in which a manglik can only marry another manglik and if not, the

non-manglik will die. Frustrated and desperate, he puts on the mantle of a sanyasi and goes on a long journey. On the way he meets many people and some villagers take him for a great sage. Due to pressing compunctions and personal realizations, he decides to return home. He takes up a job as a newsagent and decides to marry, in order to please his parents, thinking of the discomfort he had caused them earlier.

The *Dark Room* published in 1938, narrates the troubles and tribulations of a Hindu housewife. The central character of this novel is Savitri, a submissive woman, who is married to Ramani, an employee of the Engladia Insurance Company. They have three children, Kamala, Sumati and Babu. Savitri is a typical housewife of the India of those times, very much dominated and neglected by her husband. There is a dark room in their house where Savitri retires whenever her husband's cruelty seems intolerable to her. Ramani has a torrid affair with a newly recruited

employee in his firm. Savitri comes to know about it and threatens to leave her husband's home. Ramani, in his arrogance, does not pay heed to the threat. But the fire of anger and jealousy burning inside Savitri is strong enough to make her remain determined on her decision and leaves after a terrible quarrel. She tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide by drowning in a river. After some twists, typical of Narayan's style, such as taking up a caretaker's job in a temple, Savitri finally finds that she is not able to live detached from her children, so comes back, thereby, deciding to live with the burden. This novel completes the informal trilogy which began with *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts*.

Narayan's next novel, *The English Teacher*, was published in 1944. In this novel, the protagonist, Krishna, is an English teacher at Albert Mission College, Malgudi, where he had been a pupil himself. Initially we find Krishna to be a sensitive and sincere teacher who is completely wrapped in his work of teaching Carlyle and Milton to the students. In the first half of the story Krishna is portrayed as an affectionate and protective father to Leela, his daughter, as well as a doting husband to Susila, his wife. But after his wife's death, he is forced to face the harsh realities of life and is tortured by feelings of loneliness. He leads a mechanical existence, attending college and looking after his daughter, to whom he is both a mother and father now. Krishna was on the verge of committing suicide after his wife's death, but he resisted the temptation because he felt it was his

responsibility to bring up his daughter. Later, he resigns his job in college and takes up the job of a teacher in a kindergarten school. He finally attains peace of mind and realises that life will have meaning for him from then onwards. He gradually overcomes his grief over the loss of his wife and finds happiness and fulfilment in bringing up his young daughter. He no longer requires the presence of Susila's spirit to infuse confidence in him to face life, though Susila's spirit remains with him forever.

In all of Narayan's novels, the action takes place in his imaginary town, Malgudi. The regional novel, thus, finds its full expression in R.K. Narayan. He, however, produced his best works after independence when his philosophy of life which had only a confined existence in his miniature world of Malgudi, developed and broadened into a larger existential philosophy of human life itself.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is the first evocation of Gandhian age in Indo-English fiction. It is the story of "a small south Indian village caught in the maelstrom of the freedom struggle of the 1930s."⁷ The novel is an account of the impact of Gandhi's teaching on non-violent resistance against the British. The story is seen from the perspective of a small Mysore village in South India. Rao borrows the style and structure from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epic. The narrator is an old woman who tells how the local deity could give people strength to stand

against the British Raj. In the character of the young Moorthy, who comes back from the city, Rao portrays an idealist and supporter of ahimsa and satyagraha, who wants to cross the traditional barriers of caste. The work was highly praised by the English writer E.M. Forster. However, Rao's India is not a certain geographical or historical entity, but more of a philosophical concept and a symbol of spiritual calling. The novel depicts people's faith in nationalistic ideals along with religious values. The account of the country life is picturesque and realistic. "Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* has not only given a faithful reconstruction of the village life but has breathed life into it, making it vibrant and pulsating"⁸ and one cannot better "cite another authentic account of village life among novels written in the English language."⁹

Aamir Ali's *Conflict* (1947) is the story of a Hindu village boy who goes to Bombay (now Mumbai) with the desire of acquiring higher education. But he gets involved in the agitation of 1942. The narrative is written along conventional

lines. Another novelist of the time, K.A. Abbas, in his *Tomorrow is Ours* (1943) attempts to advocate certain ideals like nationalism, leftism and denunciation of fascism. However, his pro-leftist stance is clearly indicated in the novel. The narrative is again conventional.

The political upheavals of the Gandhian period were uppermost in the minds of the novelists then, but we come across one novelist, A.S.P. Ayyar, who was seriously interested in writing historical novels during this phase. A passing reference has already been made to him as a historical novelist. He could not possibly have written novels based on the political atmosphere of the time because, as a member of the Indian Civil Service, he had to be on his guard. He, therefore, searched for themes in ancient Indian history and brought out *Three Men of Destiny* (1939), a novel set against the back ground of Alexander's invasion of India in the fourth century B.C. We also get a vivid picture of the life, customs and religious rites of a bygone age. However, it must be admitted that Ayyar was a true Indian in his thought and spirit. The disturbing political condition did not affect him. This is clear from his remark: "Nothing is more appropriate in the present glorious renaissance of the period of India, when Eastern and Western ideas are stirring the people into various kinds of political, artistic and religious expression peculiarly their own than depicting the story of the time when India came into violent contact with the greatest and most civilized nation in Europe – the Greeks."¹⁰ As a discerning historian, with a definite grasp over history, Ayyar brings out in this novel, the fall of the Nandas, the rise of Chandragupta Maurya with the help of Chanakya, and the belligerent orchestrations of Alexander. But Ayyar's artistic imagination and technical skill appear to be weak and his characters remain mere shadows. In fact, *Three Men of Destiny* is more a chronicle than a novel.

A curious literary phenomenon witnessed during this period is the appearance of the ethnic novel. In the present case, a group of Muslim writers started writing about life and manners in Muslim households. They try to throw light on the erosion and decay of Muslim culture. For instance, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is an attempt to focus our attention on "a phase in our national life and decay of whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, now dead and gone already right before our eyes."¹¹ Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim*

Household (1944) sketches the picture of a traditional Muslim business household. Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers* (1945) illustrates how the changing moods of the river, Padma, in Bengal affects the lives of riparian fisher-folk.

Thus, the novels during the Gandhian phase show a remarkable advance in theme and technical efficiency over the pre-1920 novels. The most notable difference is in the selection of themes. The pet themes of our novelists during the Gandhian age related to political upheavals, social transformations, the travails of the underprivileged, irrational beliefs and customs, patriotism and history. The novelists attained sufficient experience to depict life as it is with its joys, sorrows, hatred, love and humour. Therefore, novels began to wear a realistic outlook. As W.H. Hudson says, "Art grows out of life; it is fed by life; it re-acts upon life."¹² The long drawn out digressions and tedious descriptions which characterized earlier novels gave way to better artistry and skill. The style of the authors reveals better polish and grace. The plot construction is noteworthy and the technical skill admirable. The novel, which previously needed nurture and nourishment, was now able to stand on its own feet.

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