

Portrayal of Gandhi in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract: The Indian English novel is indebted to M. K. Gandhi. Gandhi emerged as a powerful force in Indian writings in English. Gandhian philosophy and ideology lent the novels a frame of reference. The present research paper tries to explore the image of the father of nation in Tharoor's *The Great Indian novel* and Tharoor's remaking style of caricature through the magical use of blending diverse genres like parody, sarcasm, irony, allegory etc. through Indo-nostalgic portrayal of the novel.

Keywords: parody, paradox, gimmickry, sarcastic, non-violence, truth, magnetism, ideology.

One may ask what was it in Gandhian Philosophy that left so abiding an impression on Indian English novelists. Gandhian ideology lent these novels a frame of reference. It linked them to the roots of Indian culture. It created in them a social awareness and helped them to interpret the social reality creatively and indiscriminately. It made them look at man as a social animal, an individual with his responses and reactions. It sent them searching for a national identity. It enabled them to share their intellectual journey through modern and western ideas back to the reinterpretation and renewal of rich Indian tradition. His philosophy and ideals not only recharged the political life of India but also to reorient Indian literary values. Gandhian ideas and ideals continued to dominate the Indian English novelists even beyond the 40's of the century. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nector in the Sieve*, and *A Handful of Rice* we see the Gandhian concern for the lowly and the lost. In Nayatara Sahgal, Gandhian values are more omnipresent and less overt. *A Time to be Happy* embodies India's bright eyed optimism after independence. Manohar manganolkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* paradoxically exhibits Gandhi, an upholder of the Hindu-Muslim unity, an advocate of non-violence, an inspiration behind the partition of India. Chaman Nahal in *Azadi* explores the meaning of India's independence accompanied by the tragedy of partition. He shows Gandhi as an architect of freedom and as a martyr of communal harmony. In *the Crown and The Lion Cloth* Nahal fictionalizes the life of Gandhi from 1915 to 1922. Gandhi appears as a character in Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Untouchable*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, K. A. Abbas's *Inquilab*, K. S. Venkat Ramani's *Kundan The Patriot*. These novels in an epic demarcation of the first phase of the Indian freedom movement under the magnetic leadership of the lion-clothed Gandhi shook the century-old pillars of British rule in India. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* explores a parody of both the *Mahabharata* and contemporary Indian society. The chief characters of *Mahabharata* are parodied in the contemporary

Indian society. Tharoor's version of the historical account begins roughly from the time when Gandhi entered into politics till the time Mrs. Indira Gandhi is returned to power after the fall of Janata government. Gnadhi is represented through Bhisma, also termed as Ganga Datta. (Gangaji) His alternative version of history critically reassesses the roles of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Indira Gnadhi, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Jayaprakash Narayan, Moraraji Desai etc. The novel gives greater significance to the character of Gandhi. The novel presents a solid and rounded portrait of the father of the nation. The narrative depicts the unique manner in which Gandhi mobilizes the Indian masses to fight against colonialism by perfecting the master weapons of non-violence, civil disobedience and truth. It records how he used the weapon of 'fasting' not only as a means of bringing his principles to life but also as a potent power-weapon to resist injustice.

In fasting, in directing the strength of his convictions against himself, Gangaji taught us to resist injustice with arms that no one could take away from us. Gangaji's use of the fast made our very weakness a weapon. It captured the imagination of India in way that no speech, no prayer, no bomb had ever done. (p. 05)

Gandhiji not only widened the mass base of the congress party by bringing common men and women into the mainstream of the freedom movement but also gave a novel direction to Indian nationalism. Tharoor takes cognizance of his infinite fads like toilet cleaning, celibacy and love for the cows. It holds Gandhi responsible for Jinnah's dissatisfaction with the congress. Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of Hindu. (p. 142) In Tharoor's novel, it is the figure of Gandhi (Gangaji) with whom the mythic setting of the novel starts off and gradually the novel gets "populated by contemporary characters transported incongruously through time to their mythological setting." (p.355) He works out the idea of the eternal present in an ingenious manner. Despite of using two distinct time frames one for the epic and other for the modern, he combines them into a single one presenting characters, events and situations relating to *Mahabharata* as simultaneous with the present time. The depiction of Ganga Dutta going to the forest with his guests to meet the head fisherman and ask the hand of Satyawati for Shantanu serves as the best instance.

Ganga Datta didn't travel alone either. In later years he would be accompanied by non-violent army of Satyagrahis, so that the third class train carriages he always insisted on travelling were filled with elegantly sacrificing elite of his followers ... but on this occasion it was a band of ministers and courtiers he took with him to see Satyawati's father. (p.23)

Gandhi is celebrated for awakening public awareness against the British by perfecting the system of non-violence struggle against their unfair exercise of power. As an excellent instance of Gandhi's triumph, the novel documents his magnetism in Motihari; where he pushed the British to the defensive and forced them to see his point of view. The rareness and competence of his concept of truth which entails taking punishment willingly for the strength of one's convictions is methodically approved:

Truth was his cardinal principle, the standard by which he tested every action and utterance. No dictionary imbues the word with the depth of

meaning Gangaji gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by 'untruthful' or unjust or violent means. (p. 48)

Gandhi's concept of non-violent struggle is praised not only for being worthy in itself, but also as a timely and effective method to fight against the British:

When sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism had both proved ineffective, Ganga took the issue of freedom to the people as one of simple right and wrong...law versus conscience... and gave them a method to which the British had no response. (p.55)

The novel praises Gandhi's role in India's freedom struggle, pointing out in particular his honesty and steadfastness of his purpose. The narrative also emphasizes that despite of tartness in Ganghi's style of functioning, he was a master strategist. The people whom he made into a strong force were convinced that: They were not led by a saint with his head in the clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground. (p. 122) On account of the incomprehensible multiplicity of his reading Vedas, Manu, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Bible, Gita to name only a few - his dividing line between matters worldly and divine often becomes unclear.

His manner had grown increasingly other worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment. (p.26)

This aspect of Gandhi's thinking, in which he would lapse into the nebulousity of timelessness, has been severely censured by Anand, for being inimical to changes which were necessary for shaking Indians out of their fatalistic moorings. Tharoor's narrative draws attention to its other serious implications. Because of his deep rooted grounding in the Hindu tradition, Gandhi consistently exploited Hindu symbols for exciting people against the British, this made the leaders of other communities conscious of the rising tide of Hindu influence to their identity. It is true that, at nowhere the narrative suggest that, Gandhi caused disaffection among the minorities, but it makes it amply clear that, it led to the alienation of political leaders like Jinnah. This eventually sharpened the sources of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims which led to the division of the country. Though a host of historians have expressed their uneasiness over this aspect of Gandhi's thinking and practice, it is striking to mention that, how Tharoor catches the disapproval of Jinnah for Gandhi:

Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of Hindu. The Mahaguru's traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient texts, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealized Pre-British past that Karna did not believe in ... all this made the young man mistrustful of the Great teacher ... and Gangaji's mass politics were, to Karna, based on an appeal to the wrong instincts; they embodied an atavism that in his view would never take the country forward. A Kaurava party of prayer-meetings and unselective eclecticism was not a party he would have cared to lead, let alone to remain a member of. (p. 142)

Jinnah's detestation of Gandhi's ways and philosophy is quite well known

and has been widely documented. It is somewhat sarcastic that a person who fought all his life for Hindu-Muslim unity has to be made responsible for encouraging Muslim separatism, but this is evident in Tharoor's understanding of Gandhi and of several historians too. Tharoor's narrative unequivocally criticizes Gandhi for breaking his grip over the congress party around the time of India's independence, when it was needed most. He thinks that Gandhi was wrong in letting the question of partition be decided by his lieutenants. That is why the scene of Gandhi's death in Tharoor's account is important where the mythic charge is at the strongest. He lets Gandhi's murderer Shikhandin (Nathuram Godase) criticize him for his recklessness of duty and also for neglecting the issue of leadership of the party. His words clearly declare him a failure.

You make me sick, Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive, barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking other reptile's eggs, an infertile old fool ... a man who is less than a woman.

The tragedy of this country springs from you... (p. 232)

These harsh words cannot be dismissed as gimmickry and taken lightly. Tharoor reinforces their import by putting in the mouth of the dying leader. Despite of uttering "Hey Ram" he says: "I...have...failed." The novel chooses actual words of diverse world leaders and famous people who spoke on the time of his death. The narrator's comment suggests several causes for his death, in which both he and the people of the country are caught up. Its entire tone affirms that Gandhi died a beaten and cynical man:

I will not ask whether Amba/ Shikhandin was truly responsible for the Mahaguru's death, or whether it was not India collectively that ended Gangaji's life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you, Gangaji's life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you Ganapathi, to reflect on whether Ganga Datta might in fact have been the victim of an overwhelming death-wish, a desire to end a life that he saw starkly as having served no purpose, a desire buried deep in the urge that led him, all those years earlier, to create and nurture his own executioner. (p. 234)

Gandhi is not a depleted force even today. No one can ignore him. The personality of Gandhi will continue to interest the creative imagination either by the way of acceptance or by the way of rejection of the ideals for which Gandhi stood. There will be change in the perspective and the situation as well as in the writer's attitude towards Gandhi in the course of time. It will be very proud to assert the Hindi literal translation as: By giving us, the freedom without swords and weapons, The saint of *Sabarmati* made magic in the hearts of countrymen forever. Really, his life itself is a great message for the nation. To sum up, I will not miss a chance to quote the words inscribed on the statue of Gandhi at my town. In a true sense, he was a '*Mahatma*', a great soul. My life itself is my message for the nation.

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