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Transmogrification of Gandhian Views and Values in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

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In the revolutions in India from 1920-1947 the Gandhian consciousness is reflected and it is generally called “Gandhian age” (Iyengar 248) or “the Gandhian whirlwind” (Naik 114) with an unprecedented awakening of a distinctive national unity in every walk of life. Gandhi never claimed to be a saint or a reformer. He had no intention to leave any ‘ism’ behind. “Well, all my philosophy if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said. But, you will not call it ‘Gandhism’; there is no ‘ism’ about it.” (Tendulkar IV: 67). The views and values which he practiced and propagated in his life are generally considered Gandhian ideology.

If we take the number of biographies written or films produced on a single person with metonymic consistency, obviously Gandhi would again top the charts. He not only inspired the masses of India but also put immense impact on the creative writers, writing in any of the Indian languages. The writers of Indo-Anglian fiction also could not remain unaffected by his ideology. The Anglo-Indian fiction in pre independence period was imbued with Gandhian ideology and “Their approach to it was naturally that of a participant observer and positive” (Venkateswarlu Foreword). Main among the Indian novelists in English who affirm the Gandhian ideology are K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, D.F. Karaka, C.N. Zutshi and Amir Ali.

However, while Gandhi has continued to invite attention from literary writers, the nature of their response to the man and his ideology has, in the process of evolution, gone beyond the critical curve. As a result the writers of the Post-independent era, on the Gandhian persona, are almost in unison in besmirching the man. This personal besmirching is done as if to discredit the ideology behind the man as being hollow.

R.K.Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), Manohar Malgonkar’s Bend in the Ganges (1964), Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Shadow from Ladakh (1966), Raja Rao’s Comrade Kirillov (1976), Shashi Tahroor’s The Great Indian Novel (1989), Mukunda Rao’s The Mahatma (1992) and Sudhir Kakar’s Mira and the Mahatma (2004) intend to vituperate Gandhi and his ideology. This article discusses how the Post-independence Indian English novels have mutated Gandhian principles.

Seen from the Indian perspective, the dawn of the 20th century marked the genesis of a socio-political renaissance of sorts. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi naturally fitted the bill here. He had returned to India in 1914 after a fervent stint of political activism spanning two decades in South Africa. His considerable successes in infusing political consciousness amongst the disenfranchised community of Indians in South Africa, an overwhelming majority of whom belonged to the labouring class, experiments in Hindu-Muslim social engineering and development of new tools of mass usage that could be effectively used to counter the imperialistic machinations of the Western political establishment, together held great promise not only for political activists but significantly for the literary imagination too. His success in stirring the socio-political psyche of Indians to challenge and thwart English stranglehold over the vast
territory of India, his method of involving multitudes from various regions, religions, classes, castes and creeds in complex action programmes of politico-spiritual nature, his concern for vindication of eternal human values for which India had been known down the ages, and his commitment to forge an inclusive concept of nationhood based on a blending of traditional values with modern ethics, drew writers of all hues to his ideology, experiments and persona.

However, during the 1950s as the newness of Indian freedom started wearing off, the idealistic fervor that imbued it also began losing its sheen. Gandhi was now no longer at the forefront of Indian society. The new constitution of free India that was promulgated in 1950 had clearly chosen to stay away from the spirit of Gandhian values, even as it had the compulsion of retaining perfunctory ties with them. The constitution in spirit and letter emulated the legacy of the policies of India’s erstwhile rulers – the British in particular and Western in general. In its new zeal for progress the country, especially its educated elite who saw more roles for themselves in the task of nation building, found it more attractive to follow the footsteps of the Western world whose progress and pelf it had been witness to. The Gandhian way to the amelioration of the country would have been painstakingly slow and would have been a test of the patience of the policy makers. Furthermore as it envisaged the upliftment of society beginning with its fringes, i.e. its dispossessed segments, the potential implementers of such arduous process of change saw no tangible rewards for themselves in such a path. As such it was self-gratuitously satisfying for stakeholders of policy—the political, administrative and intellectual class—to think big and to promote bigger dreams to an expectant nation. The country had definitely entered an era of fomentation of euphoria where Gandhian principles did not hold value as currency. It was the era when writers of fiction in English in India started seeing the benefit of having a wider acceptance when in works dealing with Gandhian ideology they projected a scenario that was clearly inclined towards questioning the relevance or efficacy of his methods, casting doubts about their practicality or feasibility, and sometimes even rejecting them as being inherently flawed. This can be called the second phase of Indian writers’ engagement with Gandhi.

The first phase embraced Gandhi with open arms and heralded his methods being quintessentially Indian in their core, being of eternal values that have shown and will continue showing civilisational beacon-light to humanity, and consisting of lasting solutions in the strife torn world. The second phase, on the contrary, consisted of a conscious distancing from the Gandhian orbit of thought. If Gandhi could not be obviated by writers, he could at least be obfuscated. If he couldn’t be obliterated from the Indian psyche, there was no need to keep him in the foreground of action at least. If he couldn’t be lionized, he could at least be projected as being ineffectual. For approximately a quarter century following the mid 1950s, several works of fiction structured around the Gandhian concepts of life find such a way of life as being untenable, unctuous or at least being insufficient and out of sync with the times.

In Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) R.K. Narayan attempts a psychological probe into Sriram’s inner-thoughts. Initially Sriram appears immature, lazy and a bundle of weaknesses. He is not seriously interested in Gandhi and his ideology and “his interest in Gandhi was only a show and that he was really going after a girl” (56). He gets attracted to Bharati and wishes to spend his whole life in her company. “Because I like you, and I like to be with you” (59). In the end of the novel when Gandhi asks whether they love each other, “Sriram burst out, I’ve waited for five years thinking of nothing else” (252).

In Shadow from Ladakh (1966) Bhabani Bhattacharya presents a clash between two ways of life – the Gandhian and the Western – both having a widespread following in India. “He
almost thrashes threadbare the two stand points – first, Gandhian with its emphasis on pro-village economy and non-violent way of life and the second, heavy industrialization as the solution for India’s economic problems” (Jha170). In the novel Gandhigram and Steeltown symbolize two ways of life and two philosophies in direct opposition and it also espouses to the novelist’s wavering faith between Gandhi and Nehru as, “Satyajit is Gandhi’s shadow (or a Gandhian echo), and Bhaskar, the Chief Engineer of Steeltown, is almost a Nehruistic symbol or shadow (Iyengar 421).”

Raja Rao’s Comrade Kirillov (1976) is a socio-political novel in its concern. In the novel the ideological conflict gets internalised in the consciousness of the central character Comrade Kirillov alias Padmanabha Iyer. He and the other main characters in the novel do not affirm completely the Gandhian philosophy, rather they question its feasibility and sustainability.

Gandhi believed in the ideology of non-violence. He was the apostle of non-violence and he never harboured the feelings of anger and hatred for anybody. But for Kirillov, “Non-violence was a biological lie. Man was born to fight- fighting is an instrument of Darwinian evolution …” (34).

A serious reader of Gandhi as a fictional ideologue, who has seen the first two phases, would not be off the mark if such a reader awaits the third phase that would be a natural corollary of the first two phases and would be akin to the hoary writer of writerly coldness to the man and all that he stood for. With the publication of Shashi Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel (1989), Gandhi unmistakably slips into that phase. Some of the writers of this period depict Gandhi as nothing but a man of lamentable portents, ominous contradictions, consuming desires, pernicious effects etc. The verdant spring of Gandhi’s adulation through works of fiction, as it journeyed through the second phase, gave away to a period of ideological denudation of autumnal characteristics.

In such a scenario a growing coterie of writers from India has taken up fictional depiction of Gandhi’s social, and more specifically personal, life and imputes fanciful dubioseness to it. Since inventing chinks in Gandhian ideology, i.e. the ideology whose subtleness and efficacy have been vindicated by historical tide and time, may well be beyond the creative ken of such writers, what they feel compelled to manipulate is the enigmatic persona of Gandhi the man.

The Great Indian Novel “a splendid debut by the London-born- India –grown- America – educated author, Shashi Tharoor” (Balaswamy 229) covers the history of modern India that approximately begins with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scenario and comes to an end with Indira Gandhi’s coming back to power.

“This novel uses the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata to retell the history of modern India. The characters and situations are thinly veiled caricatures of well known elements of myth and politics” (Patil 39). Real personages from history and characters from the Mahabharata have directly been correlated to the characters in the novel. Ganga Datta, the character in the novel, has been correlated with Gandhi, the real figure in history of modern India. There are a host of references which confirm that Ganga Datta, the character of the novel is, in fact, Gandhi, the real figure of the modern history of India. Bhishma, the grand sire of the Kuru dynasty, the iron-willed man who swore and lived by his famous vow of celibacy is “reborn in the novel as Mahaguru Gangaji (Mahatma Gandhi)…” (Balaswamy 231). In the conversation between the British Resident and Ganga Datta the courtiers “heard the words ‘South Africa’, ‘defiance of British laws’, ‘arrest’, ‘jail’ and ‘expulsion’ ” (25). Again the author in an epical style announces, “One day Ganga Datta would abandon his robes for a loincloth, and acquire fame, quite simply, as ‘Gangaji’ ” (25).
The parodic and sarcastic element always creeps in when the author annexes extra commentary. “Tharoor subjects Gandhi to the most farcical treatment” (Chaudhury 120). The author gives description of the appearance of Ganga and one can easily judge that this is an alibi for caricaturing Gandhi:

Picture the situation for yourself. Gangaji, the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already balder..., peering at you through round-rimmed glasses....People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loin cloth. ‘Excuse me, I was just preparing myself an enema’, he would say, with a feeble smile, as if that explained everything. (35)

Thus it is an established fact that Ganga Datta/Gangaji or the Mahaguru, a celibate spiritual leader and the regent of Hastinapur in the novel has been correlated with Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi/ Mahatma Gandhi/Gandhiji or Mahatma, spiritual leader of the independence movement of India and who advocated celibacy.

Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence has been ridiculed in the ‘First Book’ of the novel. Through the Swayamvara ceremony episode the author not only ridicules his principles concerning non-violence and celibacy but he ridicules his physique also.

…When Gangaji, with his balding pate and oval glasses, entered the hall where the Raja had arranged to receive eligible suitors for each of his daughters and indicated he had come for all three, there was some unpleasant ribaldry.

‘So much for Bhishma, the terrible-vowed’, said a loud voice’ to a chorus of mocking laughter. It turns out to have been a really terrible vow, after all’.

Perhaps someone slipped a copy of the Kama Sutra a volume of the Vedas, suggested another, amidst general tittering.

‘O Gangaji, have you come for bedding well or wedding bell?’ demanded an anonymous English-educated humourist in the crowd.

Ganga, who had approached the girls’ father, blinked, hitched his dhoti up his thinning legs and spoke in a voice that was meant to carry as much to the derisive blue-blooded throng as to the Raja.

…it seemed a deceptively… triumph without violence.(26-27)

Thus the author makes fun of Gandhi’s other activities like taking enemas or his basic principles of celibacy. He comments satirically on Gandhi’s physique through conversation between Amba and Gangaji. “‘What do you think you are doing, girl? the saintly Regent asked, snapping shut a treatise on the importance of enemas in attaining spiritual purity. (The way to a man’s soul is through his bowels, ‘he would later intone to the mystification of all who heard him)” (28). Tharoor time and again makes comment on Gandhi’s celibacy, “(Ever since his vow Ganga had developed something of an obsession with his celibacy, even if he was the only one who feared it to be constantly under the threat)” (28).

When Ganga sends Amba back to Raja Salva here the author again makes comment on the character of Ganga/Gandhi. “The decrepit eccentric has beaten, humiliated, disgraced me in public. He carried you away as I lay sprawling on the wreck of my car. You’ve spent God knows how many nights in his damned palace. And now you expect me to forget all that take you back as my wife?’” (28-29).

When Raja Salva refuses to marry Amba she comes back to Ganga and he asks Vichitravirya to marry her. Here the author remarks ironically and comments even on Gandhi’s caste through Vichitravirya, “You can’t expect me, Vichitravirya of Hastinapur, son of Maharaja
Shantanu and Maharani Satyavati, soon to be king in my own right and member of the chamber of Princes, to accept the return of soiled goods like some Porbandar baniya merchant”(29).

The author presented the concept of Gandhian truth in an ironical style. “Ganga knew, when he trod through the slush and the shit of the factory-workers’ slums, that this had not existed before the British came, and that its existence was a negation of the idea of Truth in which he so passionately believed” (95).

The author presents Gangaji/Gandhiji as a bargainer and tries to give a new shade to the meaning of Truth. “Very well, “Gangaji said in that bookish way of his. ‘The first thing we shall do is to reformulate our demands. You…have asked for a 50 percent increase in wages. Your employers offer 20 per cent. Since in pursuit of Truth we must seek no unfair advantage over our adversary, I have decided we shall now ask for 35 per cent” (96). However, the workers do not agree with this bargaining but because they have accepted the leadership of Gangaji so they remain silent.

The author disparages the Gandhian non-violent protests, fasting and other ethical ways of fighting. This momentous first fast of Ganga/Gandhi achieves very small:

… 35 percent for just one day…. The workers of Budge Budge, who had started off wanting 80 percent, had come down to 50 percent and then reconciled themselves to claiming 35 per cent, finally had to settle for 27.5 per cent. Ganga’s sense of justice, which had led him to split the difference between the two original positions, served only to reduce the ultimate settlement when the arbitrator split the new difference as well. Moral politics, Ganapathi, is not always good mathematics. (104-105)

Thus Tharoor does not agree with the moral politics of Gangaji/Gandhiji. “Since no one starves for long enough to create any problems for himself or others, the entire point of Gangaji’s original idea is lost” (106).

Tharoor does not spare even a smallest opportunity of mocking Gandhi. He presents the great Salt March in a ridiculous way as Mango March by applying the device of parody. “Gangaji could dramatize and ennoble the most insignificant of causes when he chose to” (121). The depiction of this march shows that the author sketches flippantly. In the procession there are Ganga’s grinning waves of benediction, the scenes of smiling women, sprinkling of water and thrusting of bunches of flowers which express joyousness of spirit. Thus in the eyes of the narrator it is not a political march but a sightseeing tour:

In the novel, Tharoor fictionalizes the bloody massacre of people at the time of the partition of the sub-continent. Through this fictionalization of the scene of carnage he visualizes Gandhi’s abject failure. His basic principles remained ineffectual proposition. He depicted Gandhi as a disconsolate and desolate old man when even his close associates were not with him.

The partition carnage, which led to the largest exodus in the history of mankind, was stunning in its magnitude and sheer mindlessness. Gangaji, who moved from one riot torn area to another and prayed for peace and sanity, viewed the violence as a total denial of his teachings and looked suddenly old. “Gangaji recognized this, and took upon himself the tragedy of the nation. He saw the violence across the land as a total repudiation of what he had taught. All his later life he had seemed ageless, suddenly he looked old.”(227) Tharoor depicts Ganga/Gandhi a feeble old man who looks dejected over the state of the land and a deep sense of despair overwhelms him.
In order to reinforce the impact of the serious allegation, Tharoor deviates from the popularly known account of Gandhi’s death and puts in the mouth of the dying leader not “Hey Ram” but “I… have… failed, ‘he whispered” (234).

The narrator does not categorically say whether he subscribes to the view of Gandhi’s murderer but his overall tone suggests that the father of nation died as a defeated, desolate and disillusioned man.

Mukunda Rao’s *The Mahatma* (1992) “…is a parallel account of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s days in riot-torn Noakhali (now in Bangladesh) in the summer of 1946. It fleshes out those turbulent days before independence when the sub-continent was reeling under communal riots and the mahatma’s ideas of truth and ahimsa were severely tested” (Cover page).

Historically “On 6 November a special train arranged by Suhrawardy took Gandhi and his party to Goalando in eastern Bengal” (Gandhi, R 567). He tried his best to stop the communal riots but remained ineffectual. “On 20 February 1947, … he was making up his mind to leave Noakhali and go to Bihar….” (Gandhi, R 594). The author debunks Gandhian ideology and exhibits Gandhi as rejected, dejected and all alone. Mahatma Gandhi is not only unwelcome but the people protest against him and even try to bar his way by strewing garbage.

“Suddenly, the Mahatma stopped: the mud path for a few yards in front of him was littered with human excrement, shards of glass and brambles.” (1) Two days ago in Kalikata they were attacked by a young man but the Mahatma had a narrow escape when “…it had missed the Mahatma’s head by less than an inch” (2).

In the novel the author gives a minute detail of the carnage and portrays Gandhi as contrite, seized by madness, standing among the rotting bodies:

> Over the past few weeks thousands of men, women and children had been slaughtered like animals in some weird religious sacrifice. It was not a fratricidal strife: it was madness. And now this penitent old man, seized by another kind of madness, was throwing himself into the thick of the Kurukshetra jungles where scores of bodies still lay rotting, worms eating into them.(2)

The author presents the Mahatma as a helpless and buffeted person. Even his old associates have left him alone. The lonesome hour in the meeting commoves Gandhi, an apostle of non-violence, to challenge the audience in his meeting and thus the author tries to reveal the convulsive traits in him. A middle aged man comes to his rescue. “He is a messenger of God, a fakir…” he couldn’t complete the sentence. The crowd started to boo him. A few young men in lungis sprang to their feet and began to shout” (6).

Factually, it was the time of transfer of power from British rule to self rule in India. Jinnah demanded for a separate Muslim state but Mahatma Gandhi was not in favour of a partition. To achieve the target with mutual agreement, there were Round-Table Conferences, Gandhi-Viceroy meetings, Gandhi-Jinnah talks but in between there was Jinnah’s announcement of “Direct Action” to achieve Pakistan which triggered a Mayhem in Calcutta” (Gandhi, R 559) and Noakhali in East of Bengal. In this background Mukunda Rao’s novel *The Mahatma* presents the historical picture and depicts Gandhi as a man of vicissitudes and caprices.

At Last The Raj decided to quit the ancient land … with too many wars on the homefront. Their backs were broken and here in this land of heat and dust, this man called the Mahatma with his spiritual tricks had wakened the sleeping masses and the Raj had no respite. It was not always easy to handle this slippery,
unpredictable old man who claimed to be more Christian than the English. A charming satan. But it was time to quit Bharat. (11)

He feels so anguished and forlorn in those murky conditions. He finds himself in such a miserable condition as if all of his disciples have left him alone in the battlefield. Here the writer draws a picture of the Mahatma as a disappointed person who is in an agony of hopeless grief.

Another part of him suddenly screamed – It’s all over. You are a back number now. Lal, Bhai, Azad, Prasad, every one of them you reared politically, and helped each one become a leader, is on his own now. You are not their master, their surrogate father any more. They don’t need you. You are finished. Now get out of everything and find your moksha. Abandon this karma, however, noble and spiritual you might think it is, it’ll only tether you to the world of samsara, leave you in endless suffering. (21)

Rao ironically comments on the efficacy of the Gandhian principles. The Mahatma finds himself in a very tenebrous condition where he does not know whether he will succeed. “I do not know if you’ll come through this battle…” (24).

Like his other experiments, his principle of ahimsa also remains unintelligible to the people. When some young boys come to the Mahatma to inform him how some women and girls have been taken away forcibly, The Mahatma prompts the youths to protect them by all means, “…I would have appreciated you and been glad if you had died protecting your mothers and sisters. Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves to come here like cowards? …If the government cannot protect the minority and if you have decided to protect yourselves and your mothers with arms, by all means do it” (51). The Mahatma clarified, “A non-violent soldier doesn’t fight with arms, he fights with his undying spirit. If he cannot, only then, is violence better than cowardice” (52). This principle of non-violence is completely incomprehensible to those young men. “Mitra was shocked and worried, imagining the effect of the Mahatma’s words on the belligerent young men. They were no believers in the Mahatma’s non-violent fight; they would completely misread his conditional justification of violence as encouragement to use arms” (52).

Mukunda Rao exposes the domineering disposition of the Mahatma through the pumice stone episode. The Mahatma and his associates left Fatehpur in the evening and reached Samsarpur around midnight. The Mahatma scanned the toilet articles that he kept everywhere with him. The pumice stone was missing with which he used to rub his feet. It was Maya’s job to ensure the safe transport of these articles. The Mahatma ordered Maya to get it back from the village, Fatehpur. Mitra suggested that some volunteer could fetch it. “But the Mahatma was adamant. He kept staring Maya, controlling his anger. Mitra and Shanker felt helpless” (117). To their surprise, Maya walked out quietly to fetch the stone. “She felt a spurt of energy course through her; yes, it was a challenge, almost like a spiritual journey for the Holy Grail. She walked faster and with long lusty strides, like the old man” (118). She had to cross a maze of dark tunnels in the forest. Maya found the pumice stone behind a bush around the hut, picked it up and was quite elated by her success, but it was really a terrifying experience. Here Rao raises a very pertinent question; “Did Bapu, who loved calling himself her mother, really understand a woman’s mind, her fears?” (119).

Mukunda Rao tries to unmask the adamant and the overbearing disposition of Gandhi. All his associates in Noakhali know about Manu’s sharing the bed with him. He fails to recognise the elementary truth that his experiments are against the ethos of the people around him.
While Gandhi’s thoughts are in such a tangle, Mukunda Rao, through a parallel scene that can be interpreted as a symbolic externalization of Gandhi’s sexual yearnings; shows a pair of lovers, not far from this temple, locked in an erotic display of passion. Then the focus again returns to the Mahatma who is now shown face to face with a clean-shaven young man who seems to appear on the scene from thin air, brings his palms together in a namaskar, spontaneously – reminding the reader of Nathuram Godse. No wonder immediately afterwards, in a deliberate historical and geographical anachronism, gun shots are heard by the Mahatma’s followers and a few villagers, who are waiting for him on the outskirts of the village. The shots make them break into a melee, running frantically in search of the Mahatma. “They all ran, ran as they had never run before, in search of the Mahatma” (169).

Sudhir Kakar’s *Mira and the Mahatma* (2004) … “is a true story of nine years- from 1925 to 1930, and from 1940 to 1942- in the lives of Madeline Slade(aka Mirabehn) and Gandhi, where their lives were entwined more intimately than any other period of their long association” (Author’s Note). Madeline Slade, daughter of Sir Edmund Slade, Commander in Chief of the East Indian station of the Royal Navy, began her journey by P & O liner from Marseilles on 25 October and she reached Bombay on 6 November 1925.

Madeline came to be acquainted with Gandhiji through his biography written by Romain Rolland in which he had “described him as the second Christ” (Kumar160). “Romain Rolland’s Mahatma Gandhi made Gandhiji the darling of the literati, drawing-room intellectuals and the saloon women all over Europe. Gandhiji became the fashion of the day” (Kumar159). She was a great devotee of Beethoven and a great admirer of Romain Rolland who was an authority on Beethoven. Three great geniuses of contemporary times, Beethoven, Romain Rolland and Gandhiji were her inspiration. “…She had read Romain Rolland’s book about him and had been so moved that she had wanted to leave immediately for India” (12).

Kakar exposes Gandhi’s ashrams and the life and purpose of the ashramites. The author being a psychoanalyst, analyses the cause and aim of establishing the ashrams by Gandhi. However, Madeline came here with the preparation for the life in the ashram but her “experience of the ashram was quite different from what she had expected” (40). Most of the families were living there not by choice but their husbands or fathers had decided to live with Gandhi and follow his ideals. “The Sabarmati Ashram … like all such experiments, was ultimately based on an illusion. It was an attempt to create an imaginary past for those who found the present unbearable … that Gandhi himself was gripped by an intense nostalgia …”(41).

Kakar being a psychoanalyst analyses the human psychology where the follower just imitates without understanding the philosophy or the idea behind the imitated action. The characters like Harenbhai and Bhansali are just types who follow the Mahatma blindly without any perception or comprehension of the Gandhian philosophy. The author depicts such characters to ridicule Gandhi and his philosophy.

The author presents a psychological analysis of Madeline/Mira who, in her childhood, used to live in her childhood fantasies. Now she wants to fulfill those suppressed desires and wants to share with Gandhi those feelings which she has never expressed before to anyone else. In the draft of a letter to Gandhi which is next to the diary entry, Mira writes:

Bapu, when I look back at myself as a girl, every now and then there were moments when something would take me away from the world in which I lived and for a while I would not know who or where I was … In the same way, I could not bring myself to imagine eternity without breaking into a cold sweat … The grace came through the voice of Nature and it came at quiet moments … I did not
speak of this to anyone. I hear this voice again, though this time it comes through the medium of a human soul – yours. Do I embarrass you, Bapu, when I say that?

Did you expect greater reserve from an English woman? (63)

The emotional attachment of Mira could be attributed to many faceted explanations. On many occasions, very soon she had been on the verge of breakdown but quickly she came back to her normal self. Indeed there was hardly any line of demarcation between the states of normalcy and breakdown in her case. She seemed to transit from one state to the other with ease. “The relationship between Mirabehn and Gandhiji became intense in the past Saraladevi period. It picked up momentum in the second half of the 1920s and peaked during the late 1930s. There were all kinds of rumours floating about their relationship, which was at best indefinable”(Kumar165). When Gandhiji boarded the train to Bombay to attend the meeting called by the Governor and the guard waved his green flag to signal the Gujarat Mail’s departure,

… the sadness underlying the tears, a peculiar heaviness in her heart she has not been aware of, hit her with the force of a blow to the pit of her stomach. Her eyes blurred by tears that had reclaimed their rightful owner, and almost choking with the effort of keeping down a howl of pain pressing up to force a passage through her throat, Mira did not see Gandhiji look worriedly in her direction and wave at her as the train steamed out of the station. (123)

Kakar unmasks Gandhiji’s failure to control the outbursts of temper and his moodiness. He does not entertain any suggestion of his co-workers which shows his domineering disposition. “When he was angry, and this was now often, a particular line in his forehead would begin to pulse with stress born of a barely controllable impulse for violence” (134). When out of curiosity Helen Haussding bent over him to look at the papers, “he swivelled around and slapped the German woman” (135). Gandhi, here, is not the apostle of non-violence rather the narrator portrays him as a violent person who slaps even his female associates.

Sudhir Kakar discloses the complex relationship between Mira and Gandhiji. “The presumption that their relationship was not quite one-sided and that Mira too evoked complex, ‘counter-transference’ reactions in Gandhiji is amply supported by his letters to her” (Kakar125). Five days after the letter to Romain Rolland dated 24 September 1927, Mira received a short note from Gandhiji filling her with the bliss she had experienced in her first year with Bapu. “I could not restrain myself from sending you a love message on reaching here; the note said. I felt very sad after letting you go” (161). The note was followed two days later with a post card: “This is merely to tell you I can’t dismiss you from my mind. Every surgeon has a soothing ointment after a severe operation. This is my ointment” (161).

Kakar makes a scathing attack on Gandhi about his relations with Mira. He portrays Gandhi as a short tempered person also. He puts Gandhi in such a critical situation where he loves Mira but cannot reveal it. He tries to elucidate Gandhi’s psychical disposition: “Gandhi could not let Mira get away further than the distance he unconsciously held to be the optimal for his own feelings of well being” (Kakar126). In another letter that followed soon after Gandhiji wrote: “You are on the brain. I look about me, and miss you. I open the charkha and miss you. … All the time you were squandering your love on me personally, I felt guilty of misappropriation. And I exploded on the slightest pretext. Now that you are not with me, my anger turns itself upon me for having given you all those terrible scoldings” (174).

The entry of Prithvi Singh into Mira’s life and the heart, however, was late but its consequences were portentous. The relationship between Mira and the Mahatma can better be understood through her involvement with Prithvi Singh, a legendary revolutionary, whose arrival
on the scene changes the show completely. As far as his background is concerned he spent most of his adult years underground fomenting violent resistance to British rule. Gandhiji termed him “a cent per cent model prisoner.” Ultimately he sought the protection of Gandhiji who was thoroughly impressed by his reforming zeal. Prithvi Singh did not believe in Gandhian ideology of non-violence.

For this unsuccessful love story and for the miserable life of Mira, the narrator, somewhere, holds Gandhiji responsible. It is his philosophy of brahmacharya or celibacy in the background of what has happened.

Gandhiji’s concern for Mira did not end with the letters of consolation and reassurance he sent her regularly. He partly blamed himself for what had happened. He felt responsible for Prithvi Singh looking upon Mira as his sister rather than as a possible wife for, when Prithvi had come to Sevagram, Gandhiji had told him that the women in the ashram should be looked upon as sisters. He wondered whether Prithvi was only following his wishes in his behavior towards Mira. (245-246)

Here the author debunks Gandhian ideology of brahmacharya. Mira and Prithvi Singh love each other but due to Gandhi’s principle of celibacy this love remains unrequited.

Kakar through his “task of psychoanalytic deconstruction” (Kakar 97) claims to bring out the latent meanings of Gandhi and his ideology. He depicts Gandhi as an authoritarian who does not reciprocate love and tries to mould others in his own way. He persuades people to adopt his ideology but remains a failure. Throughout the narrative the author creates the impression that Gandhi was not absolutely free from human flaws. The author exposes Gandhi’s ashramas and the ashramites who live there due to their selfish motives. He negates Gandhian ideology of celibacy and non-violence. Kakar’s vituperation of Gandhi acquires a high pitch in the end of the novel when Mira, a close associate of Gandhi, refuses even to talk about Gandhi.

What goes sour still has its own uses though limited, partisan is still a piece of the wholesome pie and retains its essential/potential properties. But then there is no falling object that abruptly sheds its hurtling down motion and hangs mid-air. It can’t stop before it has hit the ground. The same happens to Gandhi once he comes in possession of the writers of the third phase. From their tall pulpits, they as if in unison not only decide to drop him to the ground but in doing so apply the force of their sleight-of-hand to make him lock-stock-barrel crash land. What craters it makes in doing so on the psyche of readers they are least concerned or may be even elated within. The social philosophy that sustained his life-work and life-style was as eclectic and open ended as Gandhi himself.

Works Cited:


