

**INTERROGATING THE CONSTRUCT OF 'MAHATMA'
AS THE FATHER OF THE NATION**

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Abstract

*Taking cue from Arundhati Roy's claim that, "[Gandhi] was misrepresented as a part of the master narrative in history", the paper attempts to deconstruct the popular narrative surrounding the saint-like cultural status of Mahatma Gandhi. In the first part, the paper strives to identify the deification of Gandhi in novels like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, where Gandhi has been impersonated as an 'avatar' and in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, where he has been portrayed as a purist. In the later segment, it examines the institutionalisation of Gandhi post-independence and the political benefit extracted out of it by the upper section of the then-contemporary caste fuelled power-dynamics. Further, the paper seeks to debunk the 'myth' that is 'Gandhi', concentrating on the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar on casteism, Gandhi and Tagore on nationalism, and the politics behind the (mis)representation of Gandhi in post-independent India.*

Keywords: Mahatma, Gandhism, deification, myth, casteism, nationalism.

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“Nations without a past are contradictions in terms,” wrote historian Eric Hobsbawmⁱ. Precursors to every modern nation are stories about its past and the present –stories full of invention, exclusion and exaggeration – which help forge a ‘national consciousness’. In the post-independence era there has always been a sharp bipolar division in the ideology of political formations. When in power both these factions have tried to weave more of fantasy than history into the psyche of the masses. It becomes imminent for the ruling class to create a demigod out of some popular figure, in order to stay on its hot seat. This paper seeks to interrogate the frailties of such a ‘deified exemplar’, whose worshipful mass acceptance overpowered his shortcomings. In a bid to excavate the forgotten, the paper unravels the socio-political agenda that heaped praises on a certain individual whose views on casteism and nationhood can be put under the scanner. At a juncture, when the perception of Gandhian politics (of protest as well as policies) is viable and claims accountability for the struggle that has questioned the state machinery itself, his ‘Mahatma’ status requires reexamination. Delving deep into the matter one needs to understand the prelude to Gandhi’s rise in Indian politics post-independence which is only possible by seeing in retrospect the political journey of Gandhi.

Arrival from South Africa: Scrutinising the Political Journey of Gandhi in India.

“Boer women understood that their religion required them to suffer in order to preserve their independence, and therefore, patiently and cheerfully endured all hardships... they starved, they suffered biting cold and scorching heat. Sometimes a soldier intoxicated with liquor or maddened by passion might even assault these unprotected women. Still the brave women did not flinch.”ⁱⁱ Even with such an obvious mis-glorification of women in his memoirs concerning the South African war, Gandhi was accepted into the political fold of the Congress as the ‘Mahatma’. Gandhi termed the natives as “kaffirs” (black skins) of South Africa and demanded a separate treatment for the Indians, his reason being a difference in hierarchical superiority. His admiration for the British government in South Africa was born out of his firm belief in the Hindu caste hierarchy, the draconian power structure of Indian society. Gandhi’s ideals were firmly laid upon the politics of exclusion.

With the passage of time Gandhi's popularity grew, and he became the sole leader of the Indian masses, while even representing them at the British office. Although he was getting heavily involved in organising mass movements against the British in the subcontinent, they were directed towards advocating 'home rule' and achieving 'dominion status', instead of *Purna Swaraj*.ⁱⁱⁱ

By 1929, Gandhi was far beyond any criticism due to his public stature. With the submission of the Simon Commission Report, the colonisers initiated the Round Table conferences to deliberate the structure of the Indian polity, where delegates representing all sections of the Indian society of the times were present. Tempers flew between Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi at the second Round Table Conference, as the latter did not want separate electorates for the untouchables^{iv}. In the next conference, the authorities made Gandhi the sole representative of the Congress, where he vehemently opposed the idea of separate dalit representation. Later in another political turnaround Gandhi and Jinnah, a fine line was drawn between separate electorates and the reservation of seats.^v In a letter to the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in September 1932, Gandhi wrote: "In the establishment of separate electorates at all for the 'depressed classes', I sense the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism^{vi}." Farsighted as he was, Gandhi sensed the immense danger looming over Hinduism^{vii}. In order to win back the confidence of the dalits he began touring India, preaching against untouchability, "and [what he] did effectively, was to rub balm on injuries that were centuries old."^{viii} The name *Harijans*, given to the untouchables by Gandhi, was a part of his politics to incorporate them into mainstream Hinduism, which was an act of outright sectarianism.^{ix}

Unable to be multicultural in the truest sense, the exclusive nature of Gandhi's politics emerged during his stand on the Khilafat Movement.^{xxi} "Gandhi ignored voices coming from the Indian Muslim community. There were many Indian Muslims who did not support the Khilafat movement. Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan had distinguished sharply between the political realm and the religious realm declaring the two to be separate. He also said that a Caliph is the Caliph only of his own territory and there is no universal Caliphate. What Gandhi did was to legitimize Islamic identity over other ties and give a boost to the pan-Islamic identity. He ignored the sects of syncretic Islam that had risen in the Indian subcontinent. There were also a growing number of secular Muslims. But Gandhi ignored them in favour of religious *mullahs*."^{xii} This event led to the marginalization of the secular group within the Muslim community and communalised national politics.

During this megalomaniac hunt for supremacy in the British-Indian polity, Gandhi writes in *Harijan* on 18th April 1940: "If majority of the Muslims of this country maintain that they are a different nation and there is nothing common with the Hindus and other communities, there is no force on the earth that can alter their view. And if on that basis, they demand partition that must be carried out. If Hindus dislike it, they may oppose it."^{xiii}

Gandhi being the 'Mahatma' could have taken upon himself a higher role to stop the partition that bothers the Indian subcontinent even today.

Judging Gandhi historically^{xiv} would have reduced the Mahatma into a flawed identity. Indians began deifying him with a saintly status, as the world took him for a timeless phenomenon, which single-handedly silenced the British colonial agency. Gandhi as a myth was propounded through literature^{xv}, while he remained the face of Indian politics with Congress in power.^{xvi}

From Mohandas to Mahatma: Deifying Gandhi in Literature.

Indian writings in English were greatly influenced by Gandhian principles giving birth to Gandhian literature, as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes, "Gandhi is too big to be given a minor role..."^{xvii} With the rising nationalistic sentiments among the Indians, Gandhi was soaring high with unequalled mass popularity as the masses imagined him to be their saviour. The popular imagination of saintly Gandhi was juxtaposed with the image of politician Gandhi, which was further sanctified through the novels of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, where he has been referred to as the *avatar*.^{xviii}

Raja Rao deals with Gandhi in a lion's share of his writings of which *Kanthapura* has been his masterpiece. In *Kanthapura*, he discusses Gandhi through the *harikatha*^{xix} tradition. Rao eradicates the use of foreign goods through the commandments laid down by the Mahatma, he further writes in *Kanthapura* about an ignorant *pathan* trying to kill the Mahatma for he thinks he is a covetous man. Not only the *pathan* fails to kill him, but also undergoes a characteristic change as the saintly Mahatma touches his body. This incident clearly refers to the biblical story of Jesus Christ healing a man possessed by a demon in Capernaum^{xx}.

In *Untouchable*, the process of deification is carried forward as Mulk Raj Anand describes a scene, where Bakha along with others is in anticipation for the Mahatma^{xxi}. Rao and Anand find themselves on the same plane as *Kanthapura* defines Gandhi as – "...a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man...", while *Untouchable* considers Gandhi to be – "...a saint, that he was an *avatar* (incarnation) of the gods Vishnu and Krishna." Composed pre-independence, the descriptions from the text acted as the signifier for Gandhi. The signified was a 'Mahatma' whom – "...no sword could cut ...no bullet could pierce ...no fire could scorch..." The question which remains pertinent post-independence is that, how far has Gandhi been successful in uniting a divided country like India in the long run. Answering this question tempts us to assess Gandhi's definition of a pluralist state – where people from different cultures, ideologies, and religions would co-exist.

Gandhi: A post time phenomenon or?

The assassination of Gandhi in 1948 unravelled, probably for the first time, the god-like status that he had been conferred, either for justifying the supremacy of an individual or for cultivating a sense of godliness within the narration of purity, the Indian nation talks about and calls for. Indian National Congress consequentially had to confront emerging right wing extremism along with the underground communist movements that gained momentum in the 'Long March' and the creation of PRC. To alienate themselves from the political discourse of violence as the mechanism to uproot zamindars and feudal lords, to substantiate the peace call earlier made by Gandhi for pacifying the demands of unrest in the days of Partition and to sustain on its 'Safety Valve' logic, INC categorically upheld the image of Gandhi and made a saint out of a political activist.

The image of Gandhi (without Mohandas), was carved out in the sacramental order^{xxii}, where the multitude believed and followed the 'Father of the Nation' and culturally imbibed the sign 'Gandhi'. In the post 'A glory has past'^{xxiii} scenario 'Gandhi' was reduced to a background image on which the Nehruvian Congress could fall back in search of cultural credibility and in order to find a nation-wide unified spiritual solace for better political score.

India progressed on the lines of 'socialism', pertinent to the agenda of the Congress in its Avadi resolution of 1955^{xxiv} and with this aspiration it introduced the term in the Preamble of Indian Constitution. In an attempt to counter Congress's wave of invincibility in the late 1980s the RSS led Jana Sangh though declared its adherence to 'Gandhian Socialism', it was in definitive sense a political farce as Gandhi introduced the dialect of religion and religious purity over politics (according to Perry Anderson) while socialism spoke of just the opposite.

India, as a nation, has witnessed a lot of agitations and movements against the state machinery. Some of these movements have openly declared its ideological adherence to Gandhism and have gained mass acceptance. But the fact that calls for scrutiny is how much of this adherence has worked positively in making a shrewd politically correct common personality into such an entity where his models are placed in temples.^{xxv}

From JP's 'total revolution'^{xxvi} to Irom Chanu Sharmila's *ahimsa*^{xxvii}, from Babu Jagjivan Ram's movement to Anna Hazare's *Lokpal* agitation^{xxviii}, all these upheavals have some relevance to the Gandhian style of movements. In organising their respective movements, these personalities banked heavily on Gandhian philosophy. Events such as these contributed to the supra-human image of Mahatma Gandhi in post-independent modern India.

While debunking the construct of Gandhi in the present era one needs to seek an answer to the question why the old and meek image of Gandhi always crops up in mass psyche whenever the name or the social code 'Gandhi' is used?

In an attempted rebuttal of the above question the political economy of the semi-deification of Gandhi must be acknowledged. Thus the structuration of the social codes by the power machinery must be minutely analysed. Gandhi in modern India has undergone a modification of appearance, with the current similar to that of Christ – the Messiah. This phenomenon is an outcome of a politically motivated process, where the state and media in a joint collaboration have used the hyperreal cultural space to inject a dose of over-emotionalism. And further has been successful in creating and sustaining the simulacrum.

A deeper move towards the unravelling of the myth would require the understanding of the Indian political turmoil post-emergency period. The reason behind would be simple as during emergency era it became important for the opposition to cling onto any matter that would help to apprehend the public imagination. With the rise of the Janta Party in the hands of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) who was then towards the end of his political career, had envisaged of “a free progressive and Gandhian India”^{xxix} in his propaganda (which he later revealed).

The Indian imagination has always responded to signs signifying the Mahatma in its signifier with devotional ecstasy. Anna Hazare being the latest to fashion himself with a Gandhi-like aura, found a way to permeate into the Indian belief system by imbibing the already structured codes making him the closest impression of Gandhi in neoliberal India. Events like fast unto death launched by Anna Hazare and Irom Sharmila, JP's concept of total revolution, Babu Jagjivan's inspiration of the Dalits to join mainstream society became a symbolic representation of the Gandhian hangover in India. Gandhi – the myth and its philosophy, was always an ideological space for our leaders to bank upon for a greater political support.

Gandhi's contribution as a freedom fighter and his urge in political activism had been an integral part of the Indian freedom struggle. Taking cue from Arundhati Roy's claim that, “[Gandhi] was misrepresented as a part of the master narrative in history”, it becomes pertinent to judge Gandhi in his totality. Popularly known as the “Father of the Nation”, 'Mahatma's' larger than life figure almost becomes a parody of 'Gandhi'. Ironically the patriarchal concept, the fatherhood in 'Father of the Nation' captures the stint of patriarchy in Gandhi. According to Kumari Jayawardena, “Gandhi's ideal woman was the mythical Sita, the self-sacrificing, monogamous wife of the Ramayana, who guarded her chastity and remained loyal to Rama in spite of many provocations. Sita was promoted as the model for Indian women.” In *Kanthapura* too Raja Rao places women on the fringes of

the freedom struggle, refusing to share the centre stage, although they suffer equally in the hands of the British Raj-like men.

Gandhi's concept of nationhood lashes out ironically at the 'Father of the Nation' with Partha Chatterjee writing about anti-colonial nationalism, "The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference*^{xxx}..." Gandhi failed to recognise multiplicity and forced homogeneity onto Indians by serving the masses with capsules of nationalism, uniting them only to be disintegrated from time to time.

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ⁱⁱRoy, Arundhati. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. New Delhi, Navayana Publishing Pvt. Ltd, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱRevolvy, LLC. "'Poorana Swaraj" on Revolvy.com." Revolvy. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2017.

^{iv}Dam, Abhirup. "Fast Unto Vote: Gandhi, Ambedkar & Separate Electorates for Dalits." *The Quint*. N.p., 13 Apr. 2017. Web. 16 July 2017.

^v Separate Electorate: The community to which the electorate belongs would choose their own leaders via an election in which the candidates of only their community would be allowed to contest and only their community members would vote. This would mean that the elections for choosing the leaders of that particular community would be held separately and would not come under general elections.

Reservation of Seats: The candidates in the election can belong only to a particular community for which it is reserved. However, every eligible voter in the constituency would vote and the leader chosen would represent them all.

^{vi}"Letter to Ramsay Macdonald 02 - Mahatma Gandhi On Untouchability." Google Sites. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 July 2017.

^{vii} Since Gandhi envisaged that without social appeasement of the Dalits there could be a tectonic shift of the Dalits from Hinduism to other religions where there are no social class division.

^{viii}Roy, Arundhati. *Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. New Delhi, Navayana Publishing Pvt. Ltd, 2014,

^{ix}The name Harijan was coined from 'Hari', a male deity of the Hindus and 'Jan' meaning people. Herein lies Gandhi's politics of incorporating the dalits into the mainstream Hindu fold, where he does not care about their indigeneity of culture and religion

Kashikar, Yogesh. "The Impact Of Gandhism On Indian–English Fiction Of Pre-Independence Period." *Academia.edu*. N.p., 2017. Web. 12 Sept. 2017..

^xContemporaneously, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi led his non-violent nationalist movement satyagraha, as a protest against government repression evidenced, for example, in the Rowlatt Act of 1919, and the Jalian Wallah Bagh Massacres of April 1919. To enlist Muslim support in his movement, Gandhi supported the Khilafat cause and became a member of the Central Khilafat Committee. At the Nagpur Session (1920) of the Indian National Congress Gandhi linked the issue of Swaraj (Self-Government) with the Khilafat demands and adopted the non-cooperation plan to attain the twin objectives.

^{xi} Further, after the war, Muslims in India had been concerned about the fate of the Khalifat, the religious head of Muslims in Turkey. Turkey had been dismembered in contravention of earlier promises by England and the predominantly Turkish area of Thrace was taken away from it. Muslims felt that the religious power of the Turkish Caliphate should not be undermined in this manner. In November 1919, the All-India Khilafat Conference was held in Delhi where it was decided that a non-cooperation movement against the government would be started unless the demands of the Muslims are met. The Muslim League under nationalist leadership supported this cause, as did the Congress. Tilak and Gandhiji saw this as the best opportunity to strengthen Hindu-Muslim relations and unite them against colonial rule. Gandhiji declared that he would start a non-cooperation movement if the Khilafat demands were ignored by the government. Mukherjee, Pranab, and Aditya Mukherjee. *Congress And The Making Of The Indian Nation*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2011. Print.

^{xii} Maheshwari, Dr. V.K. "Gandhi'S Experiment With Khilafat Movement | Dr. V.K. Maheshwari, Ph.D." *Vkmaheshwari.Com*, 2017, <http://www.vkmaheshwari.com/WP/?p=2188>.

^{xiii} "A Brief Review Of Gandhiji's View On Partition - South Asia Citizens Web." *Sacw.net*. N.p., 2017. Web. 10 Sept. 2017.

^{xiv} Guha, Ramachandra. "Ramachandra Guha's Column: How Mahatma Gandhi's Martyrdom Saved India." <http://www.hindustantimes.com/>. N.p., 2017. Web. 10 Sept. 2017.

^{xv} "The 1930's witnessed a rich corpus of historical novels inspired from Gandhian ideology and cultural values. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Gandhiji was not only a great politician but also an influential writer who tried to reach the masses through his creative writing. The Gandhian ideology, therefore, found its way into different genres of literature such as poetry, novel, drama and prose. The Gandhian impact can be found through—

- 1) The Choice of Theme.
- 2) The Selection of Style.

The theme of pre-independence fiction carried the Gandhian impact in so far as they dealt upon the much cherished values of Gandhi's nationalism, truth and non-violence that became the subject matter of whole corpus of fiction. The Gandhian theme formed the sub-structure of most of the fictional experimentations. There was a constant shift from city to village, juxtaposition between sophistication and simplicity. Apart from the choice of the theme, there had been a remarkable change in the style of writing. It became simpler, straight forward without any ornamentation of emotion and feeling. The Gandhian impact affected not only the novelists of the day but the poets never seemed to lag behind also. In most of the poems one can find the functional aspect of Gandhian ideology and his political activism. As a matter of fact, Gandhian influence was so pervasive that many writers carried the spiritual, religious, political ideology into their writings. Most of the fictional writers were fired with the nationalistic ideology and were Gandhian by one way or other." Kashikar, Yogesh. "The Impact Of Gandhism On Indian-English Fiction Of Pre-Independence Period." *Academia.edu*. N.p., 2017. Web. 12 Sept. 2017.

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^{xvii}Iyenger, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. Delhi: Sterling Publication, 2005.

^{xviii}Prabhakar, Dr. R. "GANDHI'S IDEOLOGY-RAJA RAO-MOORTHY IN KANTHAPURA." *International Journal of Research – Granthaalayah* 4.2 (2016): n. pag. Web. 12 Sept. 2017.

^{xix}Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Gurgaon, Penguin Random House India, 2014.

^{xx} Mark 1:21 Then they went to Capernaum. When the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. 22 The people there were amazed by his teaching, because he taught them like one who had authority, not like the experts in the law. 23 Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 24 "Leave us alone, Jesus the Nazarene! Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" 25 But Jesus rebuked him: "Silence! Come out of him!" 26 After throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. 27 They were all amazed so that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him." 28 So the news about him spread quickly throughout all the region around Galilee.

^{xxi}Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. 6th ed., New Delhi, Pearson, 2007,. "Myriads of faces were jutting out of white clothes. He looked in the direction of the Golbagh. A veritable sea of white tunics faced him in the oval, where, ordinarily, he had seen the city gymkhana play cricket. Now there was a profound silence. He waited in the hush and listened suddenly illumines the sky, the myriad of voices leapt up the curve of the heavens before Bakha and wrote in flaming colours the cry: ' Mahatma Gandhi ki-jai.' and, in a while, there was

a rush of eager feet ascending the footbridge behind him shouting: "The Mahatma has come! The Mahatma has come!"

- ^{xxii}"Introduction To Jean Baudrillard, Module On Simulacra And Simulation." *Cla.purdue.edu*. N.p., 2017. Web. 12 Sept. 2017.
- ^{xxiii}"The Light Has Gone Out Of Our Lives - Jawaharlal Nehru 1948." *Emersonkent.com*. N.p., 2017. Web. 12 Sept. 2017.
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