The Mahatma Misunderstood
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The Politics and Forms of Literary Nationalism in India

SNEHAL SHINGAVI
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This dissertation bears the impress of the ideas and encouragement provided by many of the people I have listed above. The errors in the project that follow, it bears underlining, are my own.
In 1938, Raja Rao (1908–2006) published his short story “The Cow of the Barricades,” a revisiting of the themes taken up in his most famous novel, *Kanthapura* (1938), where Rao describes the effects of Gandhian politics on a small village in Uttar Kanara. Rao had for a long time been a commentator and writer on contemporary developments in India for English language audiences, and the story was picked up in the New York–based journal, *Asia and the Americas*. In the short, imagistic and fabular narrative, life in an unnamed village is made difficult by the violent repression of Indian National Congress–led boycott activities by Indian soldiers “from Peshawar and Pindi” who are working for “the red man’s Government” (Rao 1947, 177). When workers at a nearby mill decide to help, they immediately come into conflict with the president of the local Congress committee, a Gandhian named “the Master,” who characteristically recommends a nonviolent strategy for resistance. The workers want to build a barricade in order to fend off the coming attack:

But the Master said again, “No, there shall be no battle, brothers.” But the workmen said again, “It is not with, ‘I love you, I love you,’ that you can change the grinding heart of this government,” and they brought picks and scythes and a few Mohammedans brought their swords and one or two stole rifles from the mansions, and there was a regular fighting army ready to fall on the red man’s men. (Rao 1947, 179)

On the day of the battle, Gauri, a universally beloved white cow who visited the village only on Tuesdays and only to nibble at the hair of the Master (“There was only one other person whose hair she had nibbled – she had nibbled at the hair of the Mahatma”), climbs on top of the barricades. The workers on one side worry that the presence of the cow will draw the villagers out onto the battlefield where they will be vulnerable to gunfire, but the soldiers on the other side are so moved by the presence of the cow that they decide to join forces with the villagers instead! In response, “their chief, the red man, saw this and fired a shot. It went through Gauri’s head, and she fell a vehicle of God among lowly men.” Despite the movement coming to an end temporarily in mourning for the death of the Gandhian cow, the villagers are confident that Gauri “will be reborn when India sorrows again before She is free.” The story ends aphoristically, “Therefore it is said, ‘The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but he is right about the fullness of love in all creatures – the speechful and the mute’” (Rao 1947, 181–2).

The story is allegorically dense with possibility and hope, which cannot be drowned in the blood of colonial repression against the various *swadeshi* campaigns that were a part
of the movements for independence. Villagers had, after all, fought against the seizure of their land when they had refused to pay taxes during the Civil Disobedience movement (1930–34), as Gandhi had asked them to do. Running through the story is a reflection of the dynamics of these protests and a wishful thinking about the next round of agitation, already felt to be around the corner. The story, crucially, relies on a particular class-based analysis – a Socialist analysis to be precise – of the village and the nearby industrial locales, of the various elements of Indian society (workers, peasants and soldiers) coming together across communal divisions behind the metonym of the Mahatma (the cow on the barricades), a scenario that never really happens in historical record, though it was clearly the hope of much of the left-leaning intelligentsia in colonial India. Still, the debates between the workers and the Master about nonviolence are resolved in favor of the workers who are convinced that there needs to be a final confrontation with the colonial soldiers, but even that never happens; Gauri’s death seems to dissipate all antagonism in favor of a resolution that recedes into the horizon. What is stunning about the ending, though, is neither the conclusion of a deferred but imminent (albeit vague) solution nor the undeterred confidence in the coming of independence but the resolution of the relationship between Gandhi and the movement in the village. All the ideas of Gandhi that one might associate with the historical figure in the fight against British colonial rule in India are abandoned in favor of a vision of Gandhi reduced to the one thing about which he was correct: “the fullness of love in all creatures.” Like Gauri, then, the Mahatma “was no doubt a fervent soul who had sought the paths of this world to be born a sage in the next, for [he] was so compassionate and true” (Rao 1947, 175). Like Gauri, the Mahatma’s sacrifices inspired even as his politics were ignored.

The story seems to be a kind of allegory, too, for the period between the Civil Disobedience movement and the Quit India movement (1940–42), in which many on the Left in India saw their moment to seize a decisive advantage from the Congress’s failure to deliver anything but the most piecemeal of reforms in their negotiations with the British Raj. This was the period when the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India attempted to unite and enter into the Indian National Congress in order to steer it in a more radical direction. The hope of many leftist intellectuals was that their ability to offer more radical demands to the people – land redistribution, abolition of caste, freedom for minorities and women – would clarify the limits of Gandhian strategies and provide opportunities for the masses to go beyond the paternalistic and limited package of reforms that Gandhi offered. There are more traces of that sentiment in this story than there are of a natural fealty to Gandhian methods of discipline, asceticism, quietude and patience. The story grates against Gandhian techniques for liberation, especially since the nonviolence of the cow cannot, as the workers predict, pierce the heart of the “red man” even if it can unite all Indians against British colonial rule. Gandhi is at best, then, when he is like Gauri, a symbol rather than an actual participant, a rallying cry rather an ethical arbiter or political leader. Rather than being the source of nationalist struggle against the British, the Mahatma is transformed into a spiritual being, whose sacrifices allow the people to continue struggling. But the sheer audacity of the phrase (“the mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but ...”), its perfect sweep across all Gandhian thought, to disavow and then reclaim him in alternate gestures, is at such odds with what
we have come to expect from the Indian nationalist writing of the 1930s and 1940s. This is no longer literature written under the long shadow of the Mahatma, but rather fiction that imagines itself existing in the moment at which the Mahatma is about to be eclipsed, when more radical futures are on the horizon. Gandhism is about to be undone – wishfully anticipating post-Gandhism, even before the moment of independence!

Most critics of Rao’s fiction have avoided this story in particular, even in discussions of stories from the same collection. This is in part because it frustrates the way that Rao is generally understood in the nationalist canon as a “Gandhian.” Part of the reason for this is that Rao’s reputation has been solidified by his earlier and far more popular novel, *Kanthapura* (which appears to endorse fully Gandhian methods of mobilization), as well as his later novels (in which he moves decidedly towards more spiritual and less overtly political themes, a move that would have placed him solidly in the camp of postindependence Gandhians in India). Because the Gandhian novelist and the post-Gandhian short story writer do not seem to share a common lineage, the latter’s reputation is abandoned in favor of the former. No biography of Rao notices any sharp change in his politics between 1930 and 1947, nor do most critics detect any sharp divergence from his putatively Gandhian nationalist politics, even though Rao likely participated in violent campaigns against the British during that time (Naik 1982b). So important is the need to underline the singularity of the Gandhian vision of the independent nation that all divergences from that vision are ignored, undervalued, or completely discounted. This has the dual effect of misreading the political context of the literary output of the period and misunderstanding the aesthetic intervention that was being made by writers at the time.

The starting propositions when reading the fiction of late-colonial India appear to be that most of the literature agreed with Gandhi, that it was nationalist in orientation (as opposed to Socialist), and that it supported the movement for Indian independence and therefore the independent India as imagined by the Congress. But this picture emerges for two reasons, both of which are hidden by the common Gandhian interpretation. First, most studies of Indian fiction are hamstrung by their almost total reliance on the Indian novel in English, at the expense of other anglophone forms (poetry, short fiction, the essay) and, more importantly, the literary output in the several vernacular (also called *bhasha*) languages. Without access to these other materials, without a necessarily comparativist disposition, it is easy to mistake the reliance on Gandhi in the novel for ideological agreement. In fact, the presumption in most literary historiography to prioritize the novel as opposed to the short story, or to read fiction of this period in isolation from the writer’s entire output, has generally led to a distorted understanding of the intellectual currents that animated the literary production of the period. If, following Edward Said and Benedict Anderson, we see the novel as growing up alongside the twin developments of empire and nationalism, then it is clear why the novel has received so much attention as the genre par excellence of nationalist thought (Anderson 1983). But in order to fully read the novelistic production of the period, to understand its form as well as its content, we would be remiss to understand the novel outside of its intellectual context. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand’s interventions in *Untouchable* (1935) build upon his earlier attempts at representing the politics of colonialism in his essays and his long
Similarly, the aesthetic strategies that Ahmed Ali deploys in *Twilight in Delhi* (1945) cannot be understood without also understanding his participation in the *Angare* (1932) project, a collection of Urdu short stories, and his debates with collaborators over the long history of Urdu literature (Mahmud 1996). Raja Rao’s translational novel *Kanthapura* becomes recognizable as a formal conceit when it is placed next to his Kannada fiction, which is much more preoccupied with the relation between religion and sexism than it is with nationalism, as such. What should be clear, even from this early reading of “The Cow of the Barricades,” is that allegiance to Gandhi was provisional and contingent at best and that the novel cannot be relied upon to tell the whole story of the coming of the nation-state.

The second reason for the dominance of the Gandhian reading has to do with the ideological shift that takes place within the careers of the writers from the 1930s and 1940s after independence. All of the thinkers in this study were either close to or actively involved in the activist campaigns of the Socialist and Communist movements in India. Anand and Ali were around the Communist Party of India and when its activists entered and then later took over the Progressive Writers’ Movement. Raja Rao joined a Trotskyist political cell while in Europe and then returned to India and participated in agitations. Jayaprakash (J. P.) Narayan and Manabendranath (M. N.) Roy were leading figures in the Socialist and Communist parties, respectively. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was perhaps the most important feminist Socialist of her time but is almost exclusively remembered as the Mahatma’s lieutenant during the famous Salt March. But after independence, they all underwent a process of deradicalization (what the Italian Socialist thinker Antonio Gramsci called “transformism”) and more or less abandoned their explicit commitments to radical redistribution of wealth in favor of the more euphemistic social justice. Anand became a supporter of Nehruvian patterns of economic planning in India; Rao, through novels like *Comrade Kirilov* (1976), turned his back on his more radical past; and Ali was so thoroughly betrayed by the experience of partition, which left him unable to return to his ancestral home in Delhi for the rest of his life, that he did not contest his exclusion from the canon of Indian writing in English. In fact, the period under consideration and the writers chosen for inclusion in this study represent a unique moment in the political history of nationalist agitation in India when more radical political possibilities seemed genuinely to be on offer. It was a period that was not to be repeated, a period whose failure produced a retreat politically and ideologically in each of the writers and thinkers under consideration in this study. Narayan, as I show, even gave up on the prospect of Socialist revolution in India in favor of reformist, nonviolent politics after his disillusionment with both independence and the Soviet experiment. Roy, a Communist activist, was killed before he could have a more measurable influence on radical thought in the subcontinent.

Understanding these processes in literary and intellectual history makes the problem of the Mahatma’s influence more, not less, important to understand. If, after all, the Mahatma is wrong about politics and the changes that are desired are far to the left of his ideals, then why do literary and political figures continue to demonstrate a residual allegiance to him? What is it about the figure of Gandhi that warrants critique and yet compels a loving endorsement? How is that writers like...
RAO – a secular, Westernized, middle-class, English-educated, occasionally socialist thinker – came to define the literary and thematic questions in their prose through the religious, anti-Western, peasant-centered, antimodernist figure of the Mahatma? And does the presence of the Mahatma ultimately doom these novels to reproduce thematically the problems produced historically by Gandhian mobilizations? This double gesture, a movement of critique and collaboration, characterizes almost all of the so-called “Gandhian fiction” written in English during the period immediately leading up to India’s independence in 1947. The more carefully this literature is examined, the more complicated this relationship to Gandhi becomes. In fact, because the literature was written primarily for British audiences but dealt with the problems of speaking to illiterate or monolingual, non-English-speaking groups in India – untouchables, peasants, women, Muslims – it seems to rely on the Mahatma even more than it needs to. After all, more so than any other figure in the nationalist pantheon, Gandhi comes to represent what is authentically Indian, what is genuinely populist and what – drawing out masses everywhere he goes – no novelist or other politician was ever able to do in the 1930s.

The Mahatma Misunderstood studies the relationship between novelistic production in late-colonial India and nationalist agitation led by the Congress by examining the process by which novelists who were critically engaged with Gandhian nationalism – who saw both the potentials and the pitfalls of Gandhian political strategies – came to be seen as the Mahatma’s standard-bearers rather than his staunch opposition. In doing so, the book challenges the orthodoxy in postcolonial and subaltern studies, which contends that nationalists use independence to bring to power a bourgeois elite, whose version of events erases the unevenness of minority experiences and demands in favor of simplified, majoritarian citizenship (what Benedict Anderson refers to in another context as “homogeneous empty time”). If, as the dominant narrative contends, these novelists relied on Gandhian charisma as the protective halo in which they hid their critiques of empire, they did so at their own peril, as Gandhian ideas necessarily resulted in the antiminoritarian project of independent India. Rather, The Mahatma Misunderstood demonstrates that nationalist fiction (and by extension the nationalist political movement) was marked from the beginning by a deep ambivalence about the relevance of nationalist agitation and mainstream nationalist politics for minorities in colonial India, and sought to recast anticolonial politics through novelistic debates with the spokesman for Indian nationalism, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. In doing so, this book articulates a recuperative theory of nationalism in India in order to move thinking about nationalism beyond the current impasse produced by postcolonial theory in an era of transnational capitalism that too frequently forgets, underestimates, or represses the national in the transnational. By examining how formative Indian intellectuals from the 1930s and 1940s dealt with nationalism’s “others” – untouchables, women, Muslims – this book demonstrates that nationalism was a contested and antagonistic field of debate in which the ultimate dominance of the bourgeois nationalist faction was not a given outcome of independence.

The picture that emerges, then, is of two kinds of misunderstanding of the Mahatma that coincide with the consolidation of official Indian nationalism after independence.
First, the category of “Gandhian” novel, which emerges as part of the nationalist canon, is shown to be structured around a misreading of the postindependence ideas about Gandhi for the pre-independence fluidity and contradictoriness of Gandhian politics. After his assassination and the development of what one critic has called the “cult of the Mahatma,” it has become more difficult to appreciate nuanced debates with Gandhi in favor of seeing all political debates being resolved in Gandhian aspirations for the nation-state. This is particularly the case in the anglophone literature of the 1930s and 1940s where the deep footprints of the Mahatma are unmistakable. Critics have noticed the long speech given by Gandhi in Anand’s Untouchable, ignoring the techno-modernist (and anti-Gandhian) solution to untouchability, as proof of the novel’s endorsement of Gandhi. Rao’s Kanthapura becomes a kind of Gandhian allegory despite the fact that the novel attempts to experiment with radical secularization as the outcome of mass agitation. Ali’s Twilight in Delhi becomes a casualty of certain Hindu-centric assumptions about the Mahatma, as the Muslim household at the center of the novel seems to be apolitical even though the novelist was perhaps the most Gandhian of his contemporaries. By tracking the development of the novelistic idea of “Gandhi” against representations of the Mahatma in short fiction and fiction in the Indian vernacular languages, The Mahatma Misunderstood shows that Gandhi was strategically deployed in the anglophone novels produced by the radical wing of the intelligentsia.

The second misunderstanding of the Mahatma has to do with theoretical understandings of nationalism and the relationship between nationalism in its anticolonial phase and in its state-building phase. The tendency in postcolonial and subaltern studies has been to see statist nationalism as the necessary development of anticolonial nationalism, and therefore to challenge the radical, democratic claims of nationalism as alibis for majoritarian politics. In this formulation, the deployment of ideas of “the nation” is not seen as the language of solidarity with minorities and women but as Eurocentric, elite and derivative discourses that are designed to shore up the progressive credentials of the state. Postcolonial theorists, for instance, tend to see in Gandhian ideas the bait-and-switch formula of nationalist appropriation: democratic ideas are put forward in the lead-up to independence and then foreclosed by those very same ideas after independence. Novelists who are now described as Gandhian tend, then, to be accused of committing the same political errors as Gandhian nationalism and are dismissed as Eurocentric and derivative, as elite, as majoritarian, as replicating the problems of colonialism and as being fundamentally incapable of warding off the problems posed by newer transnational circuits of power and exchange. As a consequence, postcolonial criticism tends to find all independence movements complicit in the failure of nationalism to deliver on its promises after decolonization. More importantly, it all but ignores the role played by the organized Left on the development of nationalist thought and radical politics that might have gone beyond the horizon of the nationalists.

The picture presented in The Mahatma Misunderstood, on the other hand, shows that statist nationalism actually requires the silencing and elimination of more radical variants of nationalism that exist alongside its bourgeois cousin. This claim is predicated on new directions in the studies of nationalist agitation in India, like Vinayak Chaturvedi’s excellent Peasant Pasts, in which he argues, “there was no agreement on the direction of
nationalism, let alone any other form of politics” in colonial India (2007, 227). What Chaturvedi shows through a detailed reading of the Patidar–Dharala conflict in Gujarat and the Gandhian agitation that followed is how low-caste peasants articulated their own demands for liberation under discourses that they inherited both from the nationalists and previous peasant kings, so that they emerge in the early part of the twentieth century as important actors and thinkers in their own right. Chaturvedi’s contribution, along with those of other Indian historians, undoes the account of nationalism produced primarily by the Subaltern Studies group, in which peasant and minority interests were ruthlessly subordinated to those of the bourgeois elite, despite the heroic resistance of the former and the radical posturing of the latter. What Chaturvedi is describing, though, can be generalized to the rest of the transformed world of late-colonial India, in which all kinds of actors were entering into politics, as the nationalists were scrambling to try to both appease and contain these new demands. Peasants were joined by urban workers, the low castes, women, Muslims and other minorities in demanding their rights in the new democratic dispensation of a free India. The victory of the nationalists in the Congress for leadership of these new movements was not a foregone conclusion.

But in addition to Chaturvedi, this book also draws upon new thinking about nationalism in literary criticism from the group of critics who have been dubbed a part of the “materialist turn”: Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, Laura Chrisman, Timothy Brennan, Priyamvada Gopal, Pranav Jani and Helen Scott. Through their forceful contributions to the field of postcolonial scholarship, it is possible to think anew about the contradictions of bourgeois nationalist liberation struggles and to uncover the emancipatory and the majoritarian, statist projects as parallel processes. As Pranav Jani elegantly shows in his new book, Decentering Rushdie, the danger of the “linguistic turn” in literary studies is how much it flattens out the picture of literary history; in its place, Jani offers up a strategy of deep attention to “the dynamic and dialectical interplay between historical contexts and literary forms, between class positions and cosmopolitan identity, between general orientations and specific ideologies as they develop over time” (2010, 9). By following Jani’s procedure, this book attempts to situate the writers of late-colonial India in a more complicated relationship to a variety of intellectual, political, historical and social dynamics than simply in relationship to the gravitational pull exercised by the Mahatma. Nationalism becomes restored as a political contest between antagonists competing for different interpretations of “the nation,” rather than a linguistic or philosophical error that dooms all opposers of empire to reproducing its crimes. In fact, one of the features of the “linguistic turn” has been to raise the text as the premier site of ideological contest, which has the effect of making uses of the word “nation” more or less synonymous with the “nation-state” in its deployment by nationalists. Late-colonial novelists themselves drew upon and modified mainstream nationalism to suit their own purposes; as a result, formal readings of their narratives demonstrate the possibility of understanding nationalism as a field of ideological diversity, a diversity that was large enough to encompass ideas that would be at odds with most understandings of Indian nationalist politics.

For instance, Anand was invested in a transnational “humanism” more than a territorialized “nationalism,” which would be the outcome of learning how to feel anew; Ali was eerily prescient about the dangers of Hindu chauvinism in Twilight in Delhi,