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IMAGE OF GANDHI IN INDIAN JEWISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

Many works of literature have been inspired by Gandhian values and principles like love, compassion and non-violence. Such literature sought to invest its narratives with a clear social message relevant to contemporary society as well as enrich its aesthetic aspects. Bapu's influence on the thought, imagination and ideology in India can be seen in different genres like literature, cinema, social and political narrative. In this paper his influence has been analysed on the levels of themes, narrative, ideology and communication in the novels *Book of Esher*, *By the Sabarmati* (1999) and *The Man with Enormous Wings* (2010) by Indian Jewish author Esther David. Indian Jews are a minority community in India and Esther David is the most important representative of the group next only to the famous poet Nissim Ezekiel. The paper will analyse Gandhi as the central trope, the primary metaphor and the main referent located at the heart of David's fiction. The objective is also to encapsulate how the Gandhian values have informed a large part of the Jewish experience in India. This paper attempts to analyse these relevant issues taking the selected texts of Esther David.

Key Words- Symbolism, Indian-Jews, Gandhian, Minority Community

Introduction

Many works of literature like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and R K Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* have been inspired by the Gandhian values and principles of love, compassion, and non-violence. Such works invested its narratives with clear social messages relevant to contemporary society proffering Gandhi's teachings for social transformation and change. Gandhism and its influence can be seen in different genres like literature, cinema, social and political narratives. There is a whole body of literature called 'Gandhian literature' in Indian

Writing in English which is evidence of how he continues to be a central figure in the literary imagination of different writers. India is home to multiple races, and it is of interest to investigate how Gandhi was received and interpreted by the different groups within our country. Partha Chatterjee writes "The message of the Mahatma meant different things to different people" (Chatterjee, 1999: 125). S Balam states "Gandhi lived his life as a well-publicised experiment. Not only did he use everything around him for its symbolic significance, but he ultimately became a symbol himself, a demigod—invested with more

mythological meaning than he may have wanted" (Balaram, 1996: 9). Gandhi appealed as much to the masses as to the academic elites and his representation in literary works can be judged both for its practicality as well as aesthetic appeal. There are equal amount of literature that is critical of Gandhi and his philosophy; these too indicate that whether admired or critiqued he remains one of the most articulated of personalities of the 20th century.

Objectives

The present study locates Gandhi and Gandhism in the fictional works of one of the minority communities of India-the Indian Jews. The paper will discuss how the father of the nation was understood and received by the Indian Jews keeping in mind Gandhi's own views on the Holocaust and European Jewry. To achieve these objectives selected novels will be examined to show how Gandhi is allegorized and used as the framing device for the stories.

Methodology

The present study is based on a critical analysis of the fictional works of Indian Jewish author Esther David *Book of Esther* (2002), *By the Sabarmati* (1999) and *The Man with Enormous Wings* (2010). Gandhian influence is visible on the levels of theme, narrative and ideology in these novels. As a writer David's location is crucial since she offers perspectives both as an Indian subject and a Jewish woman. The central concern of the paper is to locate and examine Gandhi in the Jewish experience in India. The paper is divided into two parts: the first part will examine *Book of Esther* to show the different ways in which the Indian Jews viewed Gandhi. The second half of the paper will examine the literary representation of Gandhi in *By the Sabarmati* and *Man with Enormous Wings*.

Gandhi and Indian Jews

Esther David belongs to the miniscule community of the Bene-Israel Indian Jews. Their migration to India and subsequent settlement is unique in the history of Jews anywhere in the world. After immigrating to Israel, Esther David wrote,

I had given myself many reasons to run away from India. Gradually, however, I realized that I had lived there as a Jew without fear. When I heard the stories of other immigrants and met the Holocaust survivors, I realized that in India we had never suffered because we were Jews. Perhaps it was the only country in the world where the Jews had never faced persecution (David, 2002: 372).

David's chooses to return to India where she continues to stay till date. Anti-Semitism is a hallmark of the Jewish experience in Europe and the West. But this is not the case of the Jewish experience in India. As a country, India has been receptive of minorities who had come through different periods of history and settled in the country. The Jewish experience in India is an example of the Indian culture of 'Vasudev Kutumbakam'-the world is one family. The Indian Jewish response to Gandhi and his philosophy forms an important part of their experience in India.

Interestingly, the Jewish reception of Gandhi was measured and guided by caution. This was due to Gandhi's criticism of Zionism and support for the Palestinian cause. Esther David writes in *Book of Esther* that the community was deeply affected by the perception of Jews by Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. She writes "Perhaps on the eve of India's Independence they may also have been disturbed by Mahatma Gandhi's views" (David 2002, 198). Gandhi had advised the Jews to offer Satyagraha against Hitler by saying "I am convinced that if someone with courage and vision can arise amongst them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can disappear in the twinkling of an eye and be turned into summer of hope" (David 2002,199). In 1946, Gandhi said in an interview to Loius Fischer that the Jews should have offered to throw themselves into the sea to arouse the people of Germany and the world. Perhaps, Gandhi's equivocal stand on the problem of the Holocaust and his resistance towards Zionism rattled the Jews. Gandhi's views on these subjects are published in his magazine *Harijan* and also in his correspondences with his Jewish friends Hermann Kallenbach, Martin Buber and Judah Magnes. The Jewish ambivalence towards Gandhi is reflected when the author writes

that her freedom fighter grandfather David Dandekar was a great admirer of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vallabhai Patel, but he had his problems with Gandhi. She remarks "His attitude to Gandhi is also not clear. He took the children to the public meetings of the Mahatma, but while he respected Gandhi, he perhaps had difficulty in pinning his entire faith on him" (David, 2002: 119). In *Jews and India: Perceptions and Image* (2006), Yulia Egorova states that Gandhi also compared the plight of the untouchables in India to the European Jews. Perhaps the Indian Jews could not accept Gandhi's 'Satyagraha' or non-violence as a potent tool against catastrophic events like Holocaust in Europe. As a popular leader, Gandhi had a great influence on the masses and his perception of the Jews could greatly affect their status in Independent India. Therefore, for Indian Jews like David Dandekar, Gandhi was a figure, about whom they had their own personal doubts. As the author narrates there was hesitation and uncertainty in complete acceptance of Gandhi though they subscribed to his call for 'swaraj' and boycott of foreign goods. The older generation Indian Jews was witness to the British Raj and the partition that followed. As a minority community they were anxious about their future in the subcontinent. Thus, they were greatly affected by any statements that were equivocal about the Jewish community in India.

Gandhi in Literary Imagination

The younger generation authors like Esther David engage with Gandhi and his philosophy from a different perspective. They relook Gandhi not just as a political leader but also as a social worker, educator and above all a leader for the downtrodden. For Esther David Gandhian ideology provides a frame of reference to her literary works as well as her life. A pertinent question in this regard is- Why Gandhi is more relevant today for minority communities like the Indian Jews? There are two aspects to understanding this question. Firstly, the Indian-Jews flourished as a community in an environment that was conducive to its growth. The main reason was the absence of Anti-Semitism in India. Whereas in the West and Europe anti-Semitism was a historical truth and a quintessential part of the Jewish experience The Jewish literature

in Europe was inevitably influenced by the experiences of anti-Semitism and Holocaust which give it a distinct characteristic. Whereas the Jewish literature in India is free from both and so the literature centered on secular themes apart from the themes of nation and society. Therefore, writers like David engaged with socially relevant themes and issues which included Gandhi and his teachings. Secondly, it is an acknowledged fact that minority communities are one of the most vulnerable groups particularly at times of social unrest and violence. They can comprehend even more the relevance of Gandhian teachings of love, compassion and tolerance. It is a succor for them. It is also well known that Bapu wanted every nation to protect its minority communities. Perhaps these may be reasons why David invokes Gandhi and his teachings in her writings. She could aptly identify the living compassion of the Mahatma and recognize its relevance in a conflict-ridden period where her stories are set. Perhaps, writing and imagining Gandhi was her obeisance to this great soul.

David's novels *By the Sabarmati* and *The Man with Enormous Wings* are located in Gujarat, the birth state of the Mahatma which is her state too. *By the Sabarmati* is set in the Sabarmati ashram which is nestled in the bank of the Sabarmati. *By the Sabarmati* is written before the Godhra violence and *The Man with Enormous Wings* after the incident; both invoke Gandhian values in different aspects. The very title *By the Sabarmati*, invokes the river Sabarmati and its vast bank as an extension of Gandhi's consciousness. It is presented as an idyllic location of peace and simplicity. In the stories that make up the collection, the location is itself personified as a mother that bestows upon its inhabitants the values of care and nurture. What makes the stories unique is that all the stories are woven around the Sabarmati and every story conglomerating into the waters of the river. Gandhi per se is not invoked rather images that are an extension of Gandhi and his life are celebrated. The Sabarmati ashram which is also called the Harijan ashram is contrasted with the hustle and bustle of Ahmedabad where the simple Gandhian way of life is shunned. The stories convey that everyday lives and common place activities make possible the

practice of love, care, compassion, and tolerance. It can be a space where the lessons of truth and non-violence can be shared with each and every one. *By the Sabarmati* is a clarion call to its readers to return to a way of life in which acts of love, compassion and non-violence remain in action and principle.

The Man with the Enormous Wings is set in Ahmedabad which was still reeling under the aftermath of the Godhra violence. Unlike *By the Sabarmati*, Gandhi is powerfully invoked in this book. 'The Man' in the title of the book is described in the image of an angel with gigantic wings; he is none other than Gandhi. Throughout the narrative a winged angel appears suddenly at times of distress, violence or sorrow. He is the Great One. He could touch hearts of sorrow and distressed minds and transform it. He shines his loving grace on the oppressed and oppressor alike. If there was sorrow anywhere, be it a poor mother, a lost child, a smoking train or a burning pyre he would do anything to douse it.

Gandhi as a winged angel is one of the many ways in which he has been deified. He was called *mahatma* by great leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Subash Chandra Bose. His saintliness is also attested in the words of Dominic Lapierre, who said Gandhi is "...the man I revere the most with Jesus in the history of humanity" (Lapierre, 1997; xlii). Larry Collins too wrote "Surely, as historians and editors begin to choose their candidates for Man and Woman of the Century, his will be a name high on their lists" (Collins, 1997; xliiv). The greatest value of Gandhi was that he appreciated all humanity irrespective of caste, class or creed. In her books Esther David wants to remind the readers of the relevance of Gandhi even today.

The penultimate chapter is the most symbolic of all. It describes a man with huge wings falling from the sky in the midst of a warring group. The dispersed crowd is shocked, they are in fear and awe at the mysterious figure. But, curiosity gets over their fear and they cautiously approach the figure.

What were they to do with the man lying face down on the ground, his once enormous wings burnt and charred to unsightly stubs? They turned him around.

His glasses were cracked and he could not sit up. When they came together to help him stand, he slumped back to the floor (David, 2020: 119).

The crowd forgot their enmity for a while. They were disturbed by the presence of an old man who was wearing only a loin cloth. This fear is uncanny. They were caught off guard. Confusion reigned whether he was a friend or an enemy. No one could guess his name, religion or caste. He didn't look like a man or a god. What was he? It was perplexing to the crowd. "He was coming in their way. Enemies thirsting for each other's blood, they were united at this point: this man had to be got rid of" (David, 2020: 119). The men decide to lock him in a cage. Though a dozen men try to lift his frail and weak body, they were unable to do so. They thought "How lean he was, yet heavy like an enormous burden" (David, 2010: 120). The inability of the men to pick up the figure symbolised failure to recognise Gandhi. It requires great effort to honestly practice the teachings of Gandhi. The lessons themselves are no doubt simple, yet its practice requires complete devotion, sacrifice and patience. It is easy to quote Gandhi but to practice his teachings require great endurance. The communal clashes during the Godhra violence divided the society on religious lines. To imagine the figure of the winged angel is to recall Gandhi back to life. It is apparent that the author is praying and wishing him back to life during such troubled times.

It is worth noting that it is the women and children slowly approach the figure and offer him water and treat his wings. Given that their men were busy killing each other the women and children focus their attention in caring for the man. Ironically, while men were engaged in war women and children try to build a better world. In their small acts of kindness and love they practise Gandhi's teachings. The author appreciates their role as carriers and practitioners of Gandhian values. The women start singing songs they had learnt as children, songs of happiness. Like a miracle the songs of the women and children distract the fighting men. They stop killing each other and form a communion around the fallen figure. They are captivated by the power of the old man and were automatically drawn to him. They

forgot their anger, hatred and envy. The author concludes

The old man looked at them with compassion. He adjusted his loincloth and his glasses, flapped his wings, then murmuring something flew back into the hole in the sky. The cage transformed into a statue. One man looked at another and asked, 'Did he say he was Mohundas Karamchand Gandhi?

In January of 1948, during his last fast, Gandhiji spoke of his dream of an India where Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Muslims would live in unity. *Man with Enormous Wings* written after the Godhra incident of 2002 visualises Gandhi amidst the bloody religious clash that happened in the state of Gujarat. Though not a direct victim of the communal violence the experiences had greatly affected the author and her sense of security and safety. The message of Gandhi in such times becomes the only hope for the society to co-exist.

Conclusion

A reading of Esther David discerns recurrent representations of Gandhian values on different levels of themes, characterisation and narrative voice. She centralises Gandhi's preaching of harmony and non-violence as the only potent weapon against communal violence. Gandhiji dreamt of a utopian society that was holistic, inclusive and interconnected. It is important not just to co-exist, but also to be deeply connected. Such a society has the potential to prevent and stop communal or religious violence. The stories are multifaceted tales where characters from different communities voice their dreams and aspirations as well as fear and pain. The novels are a social commentary regarding society's responsibility to its members, to work towards religious harmony and tolerance. Undoubtedly, through her fictional works Esther David has been able to capture the essence of Gandhian values and how it has influenced Indian Jewish literature in significant ways.

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