

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture - 09
Mahatma and Indian Novels in English

Good morning and welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course in Indian Fiction in English. In today's lecture we are trying to look at a set of novels which have generally been known as Gandhian novels. We are not looking at the novels per se as we shall of course be looking at those novels in various other lectures. The purpose of today's lecture is to examine the construction of the set of novels under the label Gandhian novels.

And in that sense we shall be critically enquiring into the role played by the image of Mahatma, the figure of Mahatma Gandhi in the construction of Indian novels in English. If you have been following the lectures, the previous lectures you would have gathered by now that there is a particular way in which the origins have been projected. There is an unbeatable and very definite kind of nationalist enterprise which is also linked to the project of the novel.

And in this process the figure of Gandhi places a very dominant role which is what we had been noticing in the discussions in the plot structures of the novels and also in the many themes and many symbols which have been projected as part of these novels in the discussions and it is rather commonsensical by now to understand that the angle of novels of the 1930s and 1940s have generally been understood as Gandhian novels.

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Gandhian novels

- Anglophone novels of the 1930s and 1940s
- Gandhi's shadow on all aspects of late-colonial India
- Anand's *Untouchable* – Gandhi's speech in the climax
- Rao's *Kanthapura* – Little Mountain and Big Mountain
- Gandhian style agitations and congress rallies
- 'the Gandhian whirlwind'

And we also realise that when we look at the history of the early 20th century we find Gandhi's shadow in almost all aspects of late colonial India. The different phases of the nationalist struggle and even the different phases of our engagement with colonial modernity, they all have been defined with the definite role played by Gandhi in one way or the other and there are very telling examples in the novelistic output especially from the 1930s onwards in Anand's *Untouchable*.

There is an entire segment which has Gandhi's speech particularly towards the climax, towards the end of the novel and in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, we know that the protagonist of the novel Murthy is described as a Little Mountain with an obvious reference to Gandhi as the Big Mountain and Murthy's characters is also fashioned in such a way that we get a sense of what kind of an impact that Gandhi and the Gandhian ways of political activism had on his life.

And in many other novels of the 1930s and 1940s we also find the depiction of Gandhian style agitations and congress rallies and whenever the nation is being invoked, whenever the anti-colonial struggles are being invoked we find a very compelling references to the Indian National Congress and as well as its leaders particularly Gandhi and one of the earliest historians, M.K. Naik.

He also refers to the Gandhian whirlwind, which was part of the early Indian English fiction particularly written in the 1930s and 1940s.

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How much?

o What makes a text Gandhian and how much Gandhi does one need before a novel becomes a mouthpiece for Gandhian politics?

From Snehal Shinghavi's "The Mahatma as Proof: The Nationalist Origins of the Historiography of Indian Writing in English"

Having said that we ask a question which is already been asked by Snehal Shinghavi in his essay *The Mahatma as Proof: The Nationalist Origins of the Historiography of Indian Writing in English*. Snehal Shinghavi asked this very compelling question what makes a text Gandhian and how much Gandhi does one need before a novel becomes a mouthpiece of Gandhian politics. This question definitely does not have a proper designated kind of an answer.

If you survey through the literary histories and the particular writings about the Gandhian phase, about the Gandhian novels, about the Mahatma impact in these early Indian fiction, we also realise that there is a very start absence of a proper critical engagement to find out how Gandhian these works are and what elements particularly make these text Gandhian and there is a reason and rationale for this that one could find in the historical and critical tradition.

And this lecture which also draws from Snehal Shinghavi's work is an attempt to try and unpack these various elements which went into the making of what now we understand as Gandhian novels. Let me also now take you through the trajectory of the emergence of the novel particularly as it has been written in the later years when the history of Indian writing in English generally began to emerge.

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A national consensus

- o A national consensus about the 1930s – the IE novel came into its own
 - o The novel's concern was 'nationalism' – not the personal and limited view of the 19th century
 - o The imprint and influence of Gandhi
 - o For a European readership?
 - o Anand, Narayan, Rao – Also, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Desani
 - o "Novels in English could do what none of the vernacular literatures could: namely, suture together a geographically and linguistically disparate readership in its identity as Indian"
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There was a national consensus about the 1930s right from the beginning, when I say the beginning, right from the beginning when the Indian English novel per se began to deserve an academic and critical attention. One could easily say that this was somewhere around the 1970s and Meenakshi Mukherjee of course did play an important part in foregrounding the studies on Indian fiction.

So that was a national consensus about the role played by the 1930s that the 1930s can be seen as the beginning, as the origin, as the earliest phase of Indian English fiction and that was also considered as the decade when the Indian English Novel came into its own and the kind of icons which were produced before that, before the decade of 1930s whether it was the late 19th century or the early 20th century.

They always seen as a prototypes or just narratives and the plot structure was not found strong enough to be considered as a proper kind of novel and the other consensus was that the novel which was produced in the 1930s they all had a very predominant concern which was related to nationalism and this was also presented in stark contrast against the personal and limited view of the 19th century works and narratives.

And the idea of nationalism also emerged as a single most important concern that is what the critical religion says of Indian English fiction and this nationalism was of a peculiar kind, was only of one particular kind which had the imprint and influence of Gandhi. There were of course criticisms as well as positive reinforcement that this was meant for European readership primarily.

We find some of the earlier writings particularly from Iyengar and also from the other early novelist where they also talk about the need for some kind of a sympathetic approach from the European reader and from the European critic and it also so emerged that the trio Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, they were seen as the most important figures of that period, the 1930s and the 1940s though they also continued to write in the 1950s.

And they were also partial difference of Bhahabi Bhattacharya, G.V. Desani and such writers who later did not occupy the center stage for one reason or the other and when we talk about this consensus it was also important to understand that the 1930s was seen as the period which witnessed a flowering of Indian English fiction and this was see in also in stark contrast with the writings available in regional languages.

I read this excerpt from one of the earlier works, “Novels in English could do what none of the vernacular literatures could namely, suture together a geographically and linguistically desperate readership in its identity as Indian.” So there where many, many things which were been attributed to the Indian English Novel which had come to it is own in the 1930s and while we go through some of these historical elements as facts.

It is also important to have a critical approach towards them to try and understand how certain things were fashioned in one particular way or the other. I read this excerpt for you which is the from Jussawalla’s writings on Indian writing in English and this is this excerpt tell us particularly the significance of the fiction in the 1930s and how it is generally been presented in the critical tradition and also in the historiographical tradition of Indian writing in English.

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It is no mere coincidence that there came a sudden flowering of Indian fiction in English in the 1930's – a period during which the star of Gandhiji attained its meridian on the Indian horizon. Under the leadership of Gandhiji, the Indian freedom-struggle already more than a generation old, became so thoroughly democratized that the

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THE MAHATMA AS PROOF

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freedom-consciousness percolated, for the first time, to the very grass-roots of Indian society, and revitalized it to the core. It is possible to see a close connection between this and the rise of the Indian novel in English. Fiction, of all literary forms, is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values, and at this time, Indian society, galvanized into a new social and political awareness, was bound to seek creative expressions for its new consciousness and the novel has, in all ages, been a handy instrument for this purpose. The “Three Musketeers” of Indian fiction in English – Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan started writing during the 1930's, and the first of the novels of the first two demonstrate the Gandhian impact convincingly. (Jussawalla 1985, 158-9)

I read this brief excerpt to you, “It is no mere coincidence that they came a sudden flowering of Indian fiction in English in the 1930s, a period during which the star of Gandhiji attained its meridian on the Indian horizon. Under the leadership of Gandhiji the Indian freedom struggle already more than a generation old became so thoroughly democratized that the freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grass-roots of Indian society and revitalized it to the core.

It is possible to see a close connection between this and the rise of the Indian novel in English. Fiction of all literary forms is most widely concerned with social conditions and values and at this time, Indian society, galvanised into a new social and political awareness was bound to see creative expressions for its new consciousness and the novel has, in all ages, been a handy instrument for this purpose.

The “Three Musketeers” of Indian friction in English - Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan started writing during the 1930s and if first of the novels of the first to demonstrate the Gandhian impact convincingly.” So this is how the 1930s have been positioned and presented and situated in historiographic tradition of Indian writing in English. There is a sudden flowering which has been acknowledged.

And also the centre of these entire set of writings, the central theme of the entire set of narratives, it seems to be located in the figure of Gandhi, the kind of initiative and the kind of leadership that Gandhi gave to this generation old struggle for independence and this imaging

and this figuration of Gandhi deserves special attention as we know and also it needs to be critically enquired into.

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Continuation of this consensus

- The novels of the 1930s and 1940s – allied to a variant of Congress politics and the agendas of its leaders (Gandhi)
- 1970s and early 1980s – the canon well established in Indian universities – courses on Indian writing in English, dissertations, book-length studies
- M.K.Naik's *A History of Indian English Literature* – commissioned by the Sahitya Akademi

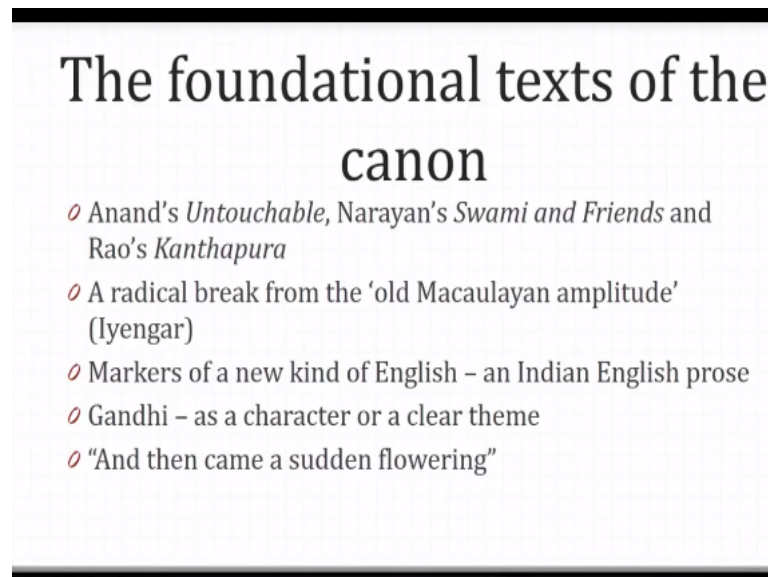
We do find a continuation of this consensus in the tradition of history writing and also in the tradition of critical writings. Any study on the novels of the 1930s, 1940s would also tell us that they always allied to a variant of Congress politics and the agendas of its leaders particularly focusing on Gandhi and then we find this sort of consensus being continually built into this canon, continually built into this tradition of historiography and criticism.

And thus we also noticed that in the 1970s and early 80s which is the period when the canon began to be well established in India Universities, there are courses being run on Indian writing in English. We also find dissertations being turned out, there are book-length studies appearing. If you remember it was around the same time in the 1970s that Meenakshi Mukherjee also brought out her book-length study on Indian fiction focusing on Indian languages as well as on English.

And what is particularly telling is another event during the same period in the 1980s when the Sahitya Academy had commissioned M. K. Naik to write a history of Indian English literature and this is also seen as one of the authoritative works on Indian writing in English and this is also seen as one of those works which address the absence of a proper historiographical framework or a proper critical tradition for this domain which was then known as Indian writing in English.

And the observance of the continuation of this consensus in all of these works from the 1930s well into the 1970s and 1980s it is very interesting to notice and throughout this process I also reiterate some of the text where considered as foundational to this a canon and in terms of fiction.

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The foundational texts of the canon

- o Anand's *Untouchable*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Rao's *Kanthapura*
- o A radical break from the 'old Macaulayan amplitude' (Iyengar)
- o Markers of a new kind of English – an Indian English prose
- o Gandhi – as a character or a clear theme
- o "And then came a sudden flowering"

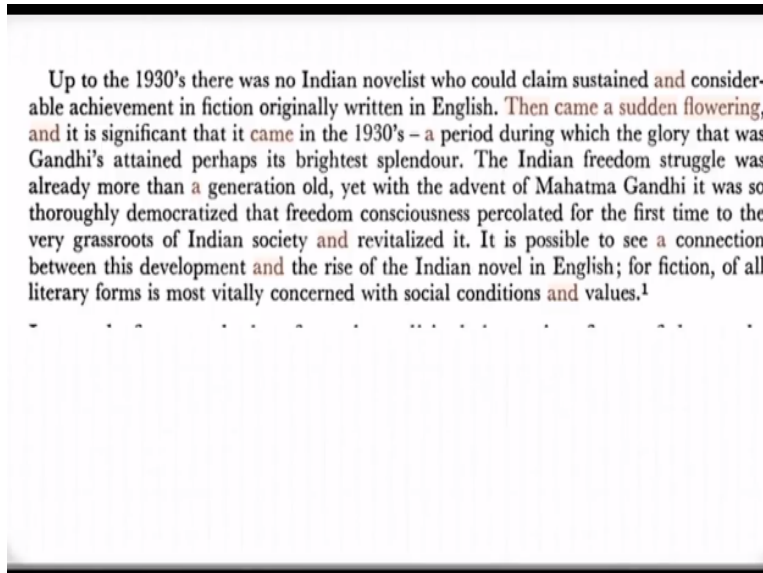
And in terms of fiction and it was Anand's *Untouchable*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Rao's *Kanthapura*, two of these works we shall be taking a look at and in this course has been you know we are also doing a detailed study of one of the later works of Narayan waiting for Mahatma which also has Gandhi as a central figure.

And the combination of Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao writing nationalist fiction which Gandhi as the central figure that was seen by Srinivasa Iyengar, the (()) (12:39) of English writing in English as a set of people who initiated the radical break from the old Macaulayan amplitude and they were also seen as the makers of a new kind of English, an Indian English prose about which Iyengar, Narasimhaiah and Naik relative point, they have written extensively about it.

And we also know about the many concerns that writers such as Raja Rao had and the many ways in which they try to address the linguistic concern in the preface and Gandhi significantly in the narratives produced by all of these writers particularly Anand, Narayan and Rao define Gandhi emerging as a character or as a clear theme. This is something that we shall be noticing and we have noticed when we looked at particular kinds of works.

And this flowering of this journal in the 1930s continued to be again being attributed to the figure of Gandhi being the centre and this is something we will notice in the writings of M. K. Naik in his history of literature.

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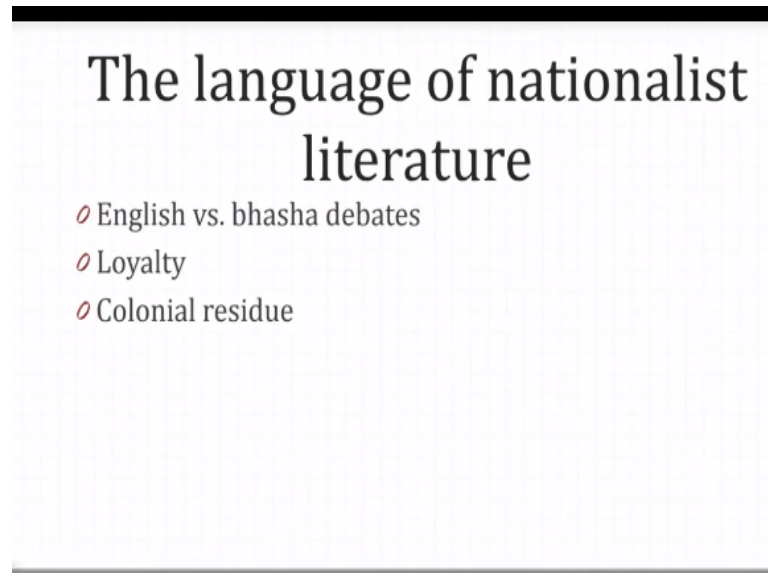
I read this excerpt to you from Naik. “Up to the 1930’s there was no Indian novelist who could claim sustained and considerable achievement in fiction originally written in English. Then came a sudden flowering, and it is significant that it came in the 1930’s – a period during which the glory that was Gandhi's attained perhaps its brighter splendour.

The Indian freedom struggle was already more than a generation old yet with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi it was so thoroughly democratized that freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grass-roots of Indian society and revitalized it. It is possible to see a connection between this development and the rise of the Indian novel in English for fiction of all literary forms is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values.”

Here notices the way in which the term Indian gets used repetitively, though the nation was not yet formed in that sense in the 1930s we find that a sense of Indianness was always already dominating this entire field. We also notice that the idea of the Indian English fiction being more Indian than the others, being more nationalist than the others and being a part of Gandhi's project towards the tending Independence.

All of this becomes a part and parcel of this discussion on the early Indian fiction and this is not to say that this was a rather neat process throughout. We have already seen how Mehrotra talks about the English versus bhasha debates.

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The linguistic debates from the late 1950s through the 1960s and early 70s, there were many, many debates which forced people to question the idea of nationalist literature and more so the idea of a national language. There were also the debates which presented Hindi versus English. So amidst these many, many difficult tassels it was important to project English also as a language of nationalist literature because this was also tied to the question of loyalty.

There was this obvious way in which English also had the colonial residue compared to the other Indian languages and just in this context that we find Wadia's intervention extremely important and we find that here there is a very deliberate, very conscious attempt being made to present English also as a nationalist literature and at some level when we read through this excerpt you will also realise that this presence English has been more nationalist than Hindi.

And this is something which has a very different kind of an import and implication at a later point as later Aijaz Ahmad would remind as said any document which is produced in English it tends to be accepted as a national document. Coming back to Wadia's defence for English, I read the excerpt for you.

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Let it not be forgotten that the best work of the Indian National Congress has been done in English; that the Constitution has been drafted in English and is yet to be translated into understandable Hindi; that Sarojini Naidu spoke and wrote patriotic lyrics in English; that savants like Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan have thought out systems of philosophy in English; that Vivekananda's works revitalizing Hinduism, were all in English. With these great examples before us, let not any Indian think that patriotism can be the monopoly only of those that can lisp in Hindi or a regional language. (Wadia 1954, 140-41)

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With these great examples before us, let not and any Indian think that patriotism can be the monopoly of only those that can lisp in Hindi or a regional language.” This is a very definite and clear cut move towards establishing English also as one of the nationalist languages and this we also realise that it serves a lot of significance in the context of the history of Indian writing in English.

And I also present to you this case which Narasimhaiah talks about in one of his essays. He talks about the many difficulties that the Indian Universities had to face when one of these earliest Indian English novels had to be prescribed for study in the Universities and this had to be done by replacing the proper British text which were from the English canon. I read to you this case study which Narasimhaiah presents.

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Kanthapura was prescribed in a South Indian university for undergraduate study in 1964. The award of a prize for *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1963 by the Sahitya Akademi at Delhi as the best novel in English by an Indian for the preceding three years, one assumed, had helped to make Raja Rao respectable and part of the establishment. But no, for before long those responsible found themselves to be the target of a vicious campaign to compel the university to withdraw *Kanthapura* from the prescriptions because, ostensibly, it was obscene, and because it was written in Indian English. Letters were written to the press, resolutions were passed by interested English teacher's associations in some colleges demanding the prescription of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in place of *Kanthapura*, and the executive council of the University directed that the Academic Council take steps to withdraw the prescription. [...] Fortunately the vice-chancellor upheld the prescription because it was not good to break healthy academic conventions. (Narasimhaiah 1973, 76-7)⁶

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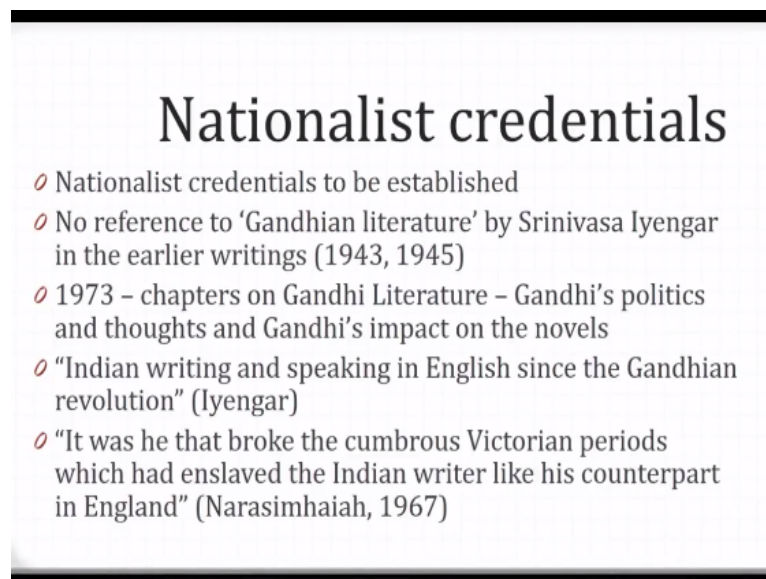
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And the executive council of the University directed that the Academic Council take steps to withdraw the prescription. And range of events follow. Fortunately, the vice-chancellor upheld the prescription because it was not good to break healthy academic conventions. Here we find that there are certain steps which are being involved in a canon making process in which the University syllabi of course plays a very significant role.

We also noticed that here much before the canon get set and dictated by the University we find that the Sahitya Academy also plays a significant role in making Raja Rao respectable and part of the establishment and even today when we look back at the selection of text that we have as part of a syllabi we do find that they all go through these different processes before making it final into the canon.

They do get some kind of a stamp of respectability and they become part of the establishment by securing one award or the other. They also make their nationalist concerns and the nationalist credentials very articulate and very visible as well and without dwelling much on this we will move on to take a look at the nationalist credentials which were established by using Gandhi as the major figure rather by highlighting the significance of Gandhi and highlighting the portrayal and depiction of Gandhi in the early novels of 1930s and 1940s.

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Nationalist credentials

- o Nationalist credentials to be established
- o No reference to 'Gandhian literature' by Srinivasa Iyengar in the earlier writings (1943, 1945)
- o 1973 – chapters on Gandhi Literature – Gandhi's politics and thoughts and Gandhi's impact on the novels
- o "Indian writing and speaking in English since the Gandhian revolution" (Iyengar)
- o "It was he that broke the cumbrous Victorian periods which had enslaved the Indian writer like his counterpart in England" (Narasimhaiah, 1967)

Due to these various reasons as there is some higher talks about and as Wadia is being forced to defend English against Hindi and other Indian languages. We realise that the nationalist credentials of this language and the work produced in this language which is English, it had to happen in some point or the other. It was not as if always already the work written in English language had a consensus and had an acceptance and respectability.

And this process can be seen in the way history of Indian English writing has been presented that has been a shift in the telling of the story of 1930s and 1940s, this is particularly evident in Srinivasa Iyengar's writings, who started writing about Indian writing in English from the 1940s onwards, it was when he was teaching a course on Indian writing at the University of Leeds.

And he also had revised this in multiple ways before it took the shape of what we now today have it this as this remarkable work on Indian writing in English. In his earliest works which was in 1943 and 1945 in the essays which were published then, Iyengar had made no

reference to Gandhian literature. He only very briefly talks about Gandhi's birthday and makes not a significant reference to the Gandhian impact in those decades.

But however, when finally, he had this edition of Indian writing in English, his work on literary history ready in 1973, we find that there were at least 2 chapters entirely on Gandhi literature and one was entirely devoted to Gandhi's politics and thoughts, it spoke extensively about Gandhian doctrines.

And the other chapter was on Gandhi's impact on the novels of the 1930s and 1940s which also meant that the discussion was very heavily focused on those works, those fictional works of the 1930s and 40s which spoke of Gandhi and the Gandhian politics and there was obvious kind of exclusions as well which we shall be very briefly addressing soon.

Iyengar also positions Gandhi in very significant ways while he is tracing the emergence of Indian English. According to him Indian writing and speaking in English since the Gandhian revolution had undergone a radical change and positioning Gandhi as a major milestone and positioning Gandhi as a major literary event in this discussion is very significant and Narasimhaiah also in 1967 he shares this opinion which by then became almost contested as well.

In Narasimhaiah's words, it was he; he is Gandhi; "It was he that broke the cumbrous Victorian periods which had enslaved the Indian writer like his counterpart in England." So Gandhi becomes not just a political figure, Gandhi becomes not just one of the leaders of Indian National Congress, who led the nation into independence, but he also emerges as this important figure which rescued language from its colonial enslavement.

He also becomes this figure who brought about certain kind of revolution in the artistic articulations of through this language and what were the implications of this.

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Implications

- o Indian writing in English = Indian nationalist writing in English
- o The towering figure of the Mahatma

- o Exclusion of Venkataramani, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nagarajan, Ghose, Desani, Khushwant Singh Ahmed Ali
- o Of course, no women!

Let me also remind you that there is a rather long and complicated history to this, it was not as neat as the process as we describe or think of it today. I also encourage you to read through the original text which are prescribed for you, go through the critical readings which have been prescribed. So we come to look at the implications of this entire process by equating the emergence of the novel with the kind of novel which was produced in the 1930s.

And by equating the novel in the 1930s with nationalist concerns and by equating the nationalist concerns with the figure of Gandhi. Certain kinds of inclusions and exclusions were being made possible. So to sum up it is possible to say that Indian writing in English then became equated to Indian nationalist writing in English. So it was not just enough to write in English, but one also had to write in English with the kind of themes which are expected within the frameworks of nationalist concerns.

And this nationalism obviously had to be linked with the towering figure of Mahatma. We find this equation being very comfortably played out in most of the literary histories and critical writings about Indian writing in English and there is an uncritical way in which the 1930s and 1940s are seen as the phase of Gandhian novels and this had also led to the exclusion of range of writers who were writing around the same period they were also successful novelist.

They also experimented and wrote extensively in Indian English pretty much in the same way like Rao, Narayan or Anand did. As we begin to wrap up this lecture I want you to be alert to these kinds of exclusions such as Venkataramani's works or Bhabani Bhattacharya,

Nagarajan, Ghose, G. V. Desani, Khushwant Singh, Ahmed Ali, they all had written extensively.

But we do not find them occupying the center stage in the discussions on 1930s and 1940s because the Indian writing in English in the 1930s and 1940s were narrowed down to fit in Indian nationalist writing in English focusing on the figure of the Mahatma and of course there were no women for a long time to come and we will also be talking about the different kinds of absences of women novelist.

And how their presence was also being overshadowed in multiple ways that is perhaps the discussion for another lecture and this is again not to say that the figure of Gandhi can only be seen in the novels of the 1930s and 40s or there was a certain kind of conspiracy at work to bring in Gandhi rather forcefully into the narratives, that works in a rather different way. This is how perhaps all kinds of canon and historiographical traditions also work.

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Gandhi in later novels

- o Nayanthara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1958)
- o Narrated by an unnamed Gandhian worker
- o Gandhi as the 'touchstone' against which 'Indian' is defined
- o Further reading: "Gandhi and Literary India" in Priyamvada Gopal's *The Indian English Novel*

So coming back to his point this is not to say that Gandhi was entirely absent in the later novels, but the figure of Gandhi which made a comeback in the later novels it was entirely different, it was not in the same way as Gandhi was present in the works written during the 30s and 40s because that was also the phase of height in nationalism and if you look at some of the later novels especially of Nayanthara Sahgal.

She published *A Time to be Happy* in 1958 which was narrated by an unnamed Gandhian worker. In this work we find that Gandhi is being used as the touchstone against which the

idea of Indian is defined. So there is an ideal way in which Gandhi continues to be projected even in the latter 1950s, I also advise you to take a look at this chapter Gandhi and Literary India in Priyamvada Gopal's book-length, *The Indian English Novel*.

There she also talks about the many ways in which Gandhi is being projected in some of the other writings of Nayanthara Sahgal as well. So with this I also remind you again to take a look at Shinghavi's essay which was reference in the beginning of this lecture and also try and understand the various kinds of methodology which are being used to critically understand.

And critically unpack the existing frameworks and even some of the commonsensical ideas which are part of our available critical tradition and historiographical tradition. I thank you for listening and I look forward to see you in the next session and we shall be continuing to take a look at some of the Gandhian novels, look at the many elements of the Gandhian, look at the many Gandhian elements in them and also critically unpack them based on the critical writings which were being made available on them. Thank you.