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Re-reading Gandhian Ideology: Myth and Reality in *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

This paper comparatively examines the representation of Gandhian ideology in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), focusing on the tension between mythic idealisation and social reality. Emerging during the nationalist movement, both novels engage deeply with Mahatma Gandhi's ethical and socio-political ideas, particularly truth, non-violence, social reform, and resistance to oppression. However, the two texts differ significantly in their narrative approach and ideological emphasis. *Kanthapura* presents Gandhian ideology through myth, oral tradition, and collective faith, transforming Gandhi into a symbolic and near-divine figure who inspires unity and nationalist resistance within the village community. In contrast, *Untouchable* adopts a realist perspective that foregrounds caste oppression and individual suffering through the experience of Bakha, an untouchable sweeper. While Gandhi's ideas appear ethically significant in the novel, Anand simultaneously questions their practical effectiveness in addressing structural social inequalities. Through a comparative analysis, this study argues that Gandhian ideology in Indian English fiction functions both as an inspirational moral force and as a contested framework for social change. The paper ultimately demonstrates that Gandhian ideology is not a fixed doctrine but a dynamic discourse continuously shaped by the complexities of human experience.

Keywords: Gandhian ideology, Indian English Fiction, Mythic Representation, Social Reality, Caste Oppression

Introduction:

Indian English fiction in the early twentieth century was influenced by the nationalist movement and the socio-political ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. Grounded in the principles of truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and social reform, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy,



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commonly known as Gandhian ideology, played a significant role in shaping political discourse and influencing the literary world. Mahatma Gandhi's influence and presence in Indian English Literature is both ideological and symbolic, even though "Gandhi was not a theorist, his principles evolved in response to his own needs, and the environment in which he found himself" (Nanda, 1958). Literary texts often engage with Gandhian ideology not only as a set of principles but also as a framework for ethical and social transformation. However, this engagement is not uniform: while some narratives elevate Gandhi to a near-mystic status, others interrogate the practical limitations of his ideas, particularly in addressing deeply entrenched social inequalities such as caste discrimination.

Most of the writers of Indian English Literature were deeply influenced by Gandhian ideology. Among the foremost are Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, whose novels *Kanthapura* (1938) and *Untouchable* (1935) show significant influence of Gandhian thought in Indian society. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao presents Gandhian ideology through a distinctly mythic, collective lens, whereas Mulk Raj Anand presents a more grounded, realist perspective on it in *Untouchable*. In *Kanthapura*, Gandhi is elevated to a symbolic, almost divine figure whose ideology inspires collective resistance against colonial rule. Through the oral narrative mode, the nationalist movement acquires the character of a sacred struggle, blending history with myth and cultural memory. Rao's narrative technique contributes to the mythicization of Gandhi by merging legend with political reality (Mukharjee, 1971). In contrast, *Untouchable* focuses on the harsh realities of caste oppression. Although Gandhi appears in the novel advocating social reform, his ideas are presented as one among several possible responses to inequality rather than as a complete solution. Anand's treatment of Gandhian ideology remains ambivalent, as the novel questions the effectiveness of moral reform in confronting deeply rooted caste oppression (Naik, 1982). Thus, while *Kanthapura* idealises Gandhian ideology, *Untouchable* critically examines its practical effectiveness.

The present paper seeks to re-read Gandhian ideology in *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* by examining the tension between myth and reality in their representations. In the contemporary context, where questions of caste inequality, social justice, and the relevance of ethical leadership continue to shape public and academic discourse, such a re-examination acquires renewed significance. It argues that while *Kanthapura* constructs a mythic and inspirational image of Mahatma Gandhi that mobilizes collective action, *Untouchable* presents a more critical and realistic account that highlights the challenges of implementing Gandhian ideals in practice. By placing these two texts in dialogue, the study



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aims to demonstrate that Gandhian ideology, though powerful as a moral and political vision, remains complex and contested in its social application.

Review of Literature:

Critical discussions of Gandhian ideology in Indian English Literature have generated considerable scholarship, particularly regarding the works of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Studies of *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* have primarily engaged with themes of nationalism, caste and social reform, often positioning Gandhian thought as central to interpretation. However, critical opinion diverges on how this ideology operates within the texts – whether as an idealised moral vision or as a contested and limited mode of social intervention.

A key contribution to the critical discussion of Gandhian ideology is by Mukharjee (1971), who observes that *Kanthapura* blends myth and history through its oral narrative structure, thereby elevating Gandhi into a symbolic, almost divine presence. This fusion enables the construction of a collective consciousness grounded in faith and cultural memory. Echoing this view, Narasimhaiah (1969) interprets the novel *Kanthapura* as a spiritual allegory where Gandhian ideology acquires a moral and metaphysical dimension beyond immediate political concerns. Such reading foregrounds the mythicization of Gandhi as shaped by narrative tradition.

Further, Naik (1982) identifies a synthesis of tradition and modernity in Raja Rao's work, stating that the Gandhian movement is presented as a form of cultural awakening rooted in indigenous values. Similarly, Iyengar (1985) emphasises the novel's ability to translate nationalist ideology into the idiom of rural life, rendering Gandhi accessible and emotionally resonant. Collectively, these interpretations highlight the mythic and communal dimensions of Gandhian ideology in *Kanthapura*.

In contrast, criticism of *Untouchable* has largely centred on its realist mode and its uncompromising depiction of caste oppression. Iyengar (1985) characterised Anand's fiction as deeply humanistic, exposing the dehumanising effects of untouchability with stark clarity. Similarly, Walsh (1990) notes that Anand avoids romanticisation, foregrounding the material conditions of the oppressed instead and thereby challenging idealised representations of Indian society. Within this realist framework, Gandhian ideology appears as one among several responses to social inequality rather than a definitive solution.

The ethical significance of Gandhian thought is acknowledged in the critical discussion of *Untouchable*, though the novel also exposes the difficulty of translating moral ideals into social reality. Naik (1982) observes that while Gandhi's speech introduces a reformist perspective, the narrative simultaneously questions its immediate effectiveness in



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addressing entrenched caste oppression. Similarly, Walsh (1990) notes that Anand's realism foregrounds the harsh material conditions of the oppressed rather than offering idealised solutions. This ambivalence positions Anand's engagement with Gandhian ideology as critical rather than affirmative.

From a historical perspective, Nanda (1958) underscores Gandhi's far-reaching influence on Indian intellectual life, noting that his ideas provoked both reverence and critique. In a related vein, Ahmad (1992) argues that nationalist discourse often oscillates between ideological idealism and material realities, a tension that illuminates the contrast between mythic portrayal in *Kanthapura* and the realist depiction in *Untouchable*.

Postcolonial and subaltern approaches have further nuanced this discussion. Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern draws attention to the challenges of representing marginalised voices within dominant frameworks. Although Spivak does not directly discuss these novels, her insights help illuminate readings of *Untouchable* that foreground subaltern experience through mediated narration. Similarly, Guha's (1983) emphasis on subaltern agency resonates with the collective resistance depicted in *Kanthapura*. However, such studies tend to treat the texts in isolation rather than in direct comparison.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, there remains a relative lack of comparative studies that examine the interplay between mythic idealisation and social reality in the representation of Gandhian ideology. While critics have recognised both its inspirational force and its practical limitations, few have analysed how these dimensions operate across differing narrative modes. This study addresses that gap by offering a comparative re-reading of *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*, demonstrating how Gandhian ideology is simultaneously constructed as a mythic force and interrogated through realistic representation.

Gandhian Ideology – Conceptual Framework:

Reading of *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* requires an understanding of Gandhian ideology. It is a broad ethical and socio-political philosophy grounded in truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), self-discipline, and social reform. The principle of truth (satya) forms the foundation of Gandhian thought. Truth (satya) is the guiding force of ethical action and moral integrity (Gandhi, 1927), and non-violence (ahimsa) is an active force of compassion and resistance to injustice rather than simply the absence of violence (Gandhi, 1938). These principles together shape the concept of 'satyagraha', a form of non-violent resistance based on moral persuasion and self-suffering.

Gandhi viewed freedom not merely as political independence but as the moral transformation of individuals and society. As Nanda (1958) explains, 'satyagraha'



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transformed political struggle into an ethical endeavour aimed at appealing to the opponent's conscience rather than defeating them through force. Gandhi (1933) also linked political freedom with social reform, particularly the eradication of untouchability, which he regarded as a moral evil within Indian society. However, his approach to caste reform has been subject to critical debate. Ambedkar (1935) argued that Gandhi's reformist approach did not adequately challenge the structural foundations of caste hierarchy. This debate reveals the contested nature of Gandhian ideology in relation to social justice.

Another important aspect of Gandhian thought is its emphasis on rural self-reliance and moral regeneration. In *Hind Swaraj* (1938), Gandhi critiques modern industrial civilisation and advocates village-centred development rooted in ethical values. Radhakrishnan (1953) notes that Gandhi's philosophy combines spiritual idealism with social engagement. However, critics have argued that an excessive reliance on moral transformation alone may not adequately address deeply rooted social and structural inequalities. Thus, Gandhian ideology emerges as both an influential moral vision and a contested socio-political framework, making it central to the study of its literary representation and reinterpretation across diverse narrative forms and social contexts, particularly in novels such as *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*.

***Kanthapura* – Mythic Construction of Gandhi:**

Raja Rao presents Gandhian ideology in *Kanthapura* through myth, oral tradition, and collective belief. Rather than presenting Mahatma Gandhi solely as a historically grounded political leader, the novel elevates him to a symbolic, quasi-divine figure whose presence is felt more through faith than through direct action. This mythic construction is achieved through the novel's oral narrative mode, its integration of mythological analogies, and its representation of collective consciousness within the village community.

One of the most striking features of *Kanthapura* is its narrative form, which draws upon the convention of oral storytelling. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elderly village woman, whose voice reflects the rhythms and idioms of traditional Indian discourse. Mukherjee (1971) observes that the narrative strategy allows the novel to blend myth and history, transforming contemporary political events into elements of a larger cultural and spiritual narrative. Thus, Gandhi's political movement is not simply reported but reimagined within a familiar mythic framework, making it accessible and meaningful to the rural audience.

Rao further reinforces Gandhi's symbolic stature through references to Hindu mythology. Gandhi is often associated with divine or heroic figures, and the struggle against colonial rule is often framed as an epic battle between good and evil. For instance, the



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nationalist movement is described in terms reminiscent of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in which forces of righteousness confront oppressive power. Narasimhiah (1969) notes that such analogies elevate Gandhi beyond the realm of ordinary politics, casting him as a moral and spiritual leader whose authority derives from a higher ethical order. This symbolic elevation contributes to the perception of Gandhi as an almost mythic figure within the narrative.

In addition to mythological references, the novel emphasises the role of collective belief in shaping Gandhi's image. The villagers of Kanthapura engage with Gandhian ideology through faith, devotion, and communal experience. Gandhi becomes a distant yet powerful presence whose ideas are transmitted through local leaders such as Moorthy, who serves as the local representative of Gandhian values like non-violence, sacrifice, and social reform. Naik (1982) points out that this process reflects a synthesis of tradition and modernity, where nationalist ideology is absorbed into the cultural fabric of rural life. The villagers' unquestioning faith in Gandhi underscores the extent to which his ideology is transformed into a form of collective myth.

Furthermore, women play an important role in the nationalist movement depicted in the novel, contributing to its mythic dimension. Their participation in protests and their willingness to endure suffering transform political resistance into a shared spiritual journey. Iyengar (1985) observes that the strength of *Kanthapura* lies in its ability to render the nationalist movement as a lived, emotional experience, deeply rooted in the community's cultural life. This communal participation reinforces the idea of Gandhi as a unifying and inspirational force.

At the same time, the novel's mythic construction of Gandhi does not entirely obscure the realities of colonial oppression. The violent suppression of the villagers by colonial authorities disrupts the otherwise idealised narrative. This suggests that although Gandhian ideology serves as a powerful source of inspiration, its translation into social and political reality continues to face serious challenges. Nevertheless, the novel largely sustains a tone of faith and reverence towards Gandhi's moral authority.

Kanthapura portrays Gandhian ideology as a mythic and collective force that inspires unity and resistance. Gandhi emerges not merely as a political figure but as a cultural symbol whose influence transcends historical boundaries.

***Untouchable* – Realist and Critical Perspective:**

Untouchable, in contrast to the mythic tone of *Kanthapura*, offers a sharply realist and often interrogative engagement with Gandhian ideology, situating it within the lived experience of caste oppression. The novel focuses on a single day in the life of Bakha, an



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untouchable sweeper boy, and exposes the humiliations produced by caste discrimination. Anand's realism is evident in his detailed depiction of Bakha's daily experiences, including insults, exclusion, and denial of dignity. Iyengar (1985) remarks that Anand's fiction is marked by a profound humanism that reveals the indignities heaped upon the lowly with uncompromising clarity. The novel, therefore, resists romanticised portrayals of Indian society.

Gandhian ideology enters the narrative primarily through Gandhi's speech against untouchability. Gandhi's address offers a moral critique of caste discrimination and calls for social reform grounded in ethical responsibility. However, the speech appears toward the end of the novel and does not immediately transform Bakha's condition. Naik (1982) observes that, while the speech introduces a reformist vision, it remains uncertain about its effectiveness.

Critics have frequently underscored the tension between ethical idealism and social reality. Walsh (1990) argues that Anand's realism foregrounds material realities rather than ideological idealism. This tension is further highlighted through the novel's conclusion, where Bakha considers different possibilities for change, including Gandhian reform, modern sanitation, and education. Anand does not present any of these as a complete solution. Gandhian thought in *Untouchable* is neither dismissed nor fully endorsed; rather, it is subjected to narrative testing against the stubborn persistence of caste-based exclusion.

The novel also reveals the gap between ethical ideals and structural inequalities. Radhakrishnan (1953) points out that moral principles often face difficulties when translated into social practices. While Gandhi's call for the abolition of untouchability is ethically compelling, Bakha's circumstances remain largely unchanged within the temporal frame of the novel. Gandhi's ethical vision appears meaningful yet insufficient in changing the realities of caste oppression.

Moreover, the novel's focus on an individual protagonist introduces a perspective distinct from collective narratives of reform. Bakha's individual consciousness remains central to the narrative. His confusion, shame, and aspiration shape the reader's understanding of Gandhian ideology. His response to Gandhi's speech is not one of immediate conversion but of tentative curiosity, filtered through limited access to education and social mobility. Unlike the collective mobilisation in *Kanthapura*, Gandhian thought in *Untouchable* appears distant and uncertain when confronted with lived social suffering.

From a broader critical standpoint, *Untouchable* can also be seen in light of debates on caste and reform articulated by figures such as B. R. Ambedkar. The novel indirectly resonates with Ambedkar's (1935) critique that the eradication of untouchability requires



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structural transformation rather than moral persuasion alone. While Anand does not directly stage this debate, the novel's realist texture and attention to institutionalised inequality resonate with such critiques, implicitly questioning the sufficiency of reformist approaches that fail to dismantle the foundations of the caste hierarchy.

Finally, Anand's narrative technique – marked by detailed description, episodic structure, and close alignment with Bakha's perspective – reinforces the novel's critical stance. By limiting the temporal scope to a single day and concentrating on embodied experience, the text resists abstract generalisation and insists on the urgency of lived reality. As a result, Gandhian ideology is encountered not as a transcendent or mythic force but as a discourse that must contend with entrenched social practices and material conditions.

Untouchable presents a realist and critical perspective on Gandhian ideology, acknowledging its ethical appeal while probing its practical limitations. Through its focus on individual suffering and its refusal to offer easy resolution, the novel complicates idealised narratives of reform and highlights the gap between moral aspiration and social transformation. This critical engagement provides a necessary counterpoint to mythic constructions of Gandhi, underscoring the complexity of his ideological legacy in Indian English fiction.

Comparative Analysis:

A comparative reading of *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* reveals two distinct yet interconnected modes of representing Gandhian ideology: the mythic and collective on the one hand, and the realist and critical on the other. While both novels engage with Gandhi's ethical and political vision, they differ in narrative style, ideological emphasis, and their treatment of social change.

The most significant contrast lies in the narrative mode. *Kanthapura* mythologises Gandhi through oral storytelling, religious symbolism, and collective memory. As Mukherjee (1971) states, the novel blends myth and history to create a spiritually charged representation of nationalism. In contrast, *Untouchable* adopts a realist approach, focusing on immediate social realities; Gandhi appears only briefly, and his ideas are filtered through Bakha's uncertain understanding. Therefore, Walsh (1990) views Anand's realism as a challenge to idealised visions of Indian society.

These novels also differ in their treatment of collective and individual experience. In *Kanthapura*, the village community collectively embraces Gandhian ideology and participates in the nationalist struggle. Gandhi becomes a unifying moral force. By contrast, *Untouchable* centres on Bakha's personal suffering and isolation, revealing the limits of collective nationalist rhetoric in transforming individual lives.



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Another major difference concerns caste and social reform. In *Kanthapura*, caste issues are incorporated into the broader nationalist movement, and Gandhian ideals are presented as part of social awakening. In *Untouchable*, however, caste oppression remains the central issue, and Gandhi's reformist message appears ethically meaningful but practically uncertain. The contrast thus highlights the difference between ideological aspiration and social actuality.

Another crucial dimension of comparison is the relationship between narrative form and ideological meaning. The oral and episodic structure of *Kanthapura* facilitates the mythic construction of Gandhi, while the single-day structure of *Untouchable* intensifies the realism of Bakha's suffering. Through these contrasting forms, the novels present different perspectives on the possibilities and limitations of Gandhian ideology.

The tension between idealism and practical limitations is further illuminated when *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* are read alongside broader critical perspectives. Nanda (1958) observes that Gandhian thought inspired both reverence and critical engagement, reflecting its complex role in Indian intellectual life, whereas Ahmad (1992) argues that nationalist discourse often oscillates between ideological aspiration and material reality. These critical insights resonate with the contrasting portrayals in *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable*, where Gandhian ideology is simultaneously celebrated as a moral force and questioned for its practical effectiveness.

Furthermore, the comparative framework highlights the different roles Gandhi plays within the narrative. In *Kanthapura*, Gandhi operates as a distant yet omnipresent symbol whose authority shapes collective action. His absence from direct action paradoxically enhances his mythic stature. In *Untouchable*, however, Gandhi's physical presence – limited to a single speech – does not translate into immediate transformation, thereby underscoring the gap between rhetoric and reality. This contrast reinforces the idea that Gandhian ideology, while powerful in its ethical vision, faces significant challenges in practice.

A comparative analysis of *Kanthapura* and *Untouchable* demonstrates that Gandhian ideology is neither uniformly represented nor uncritically accepted in Indian English fiction. While *Kanthapura* constructs a mythic and inspirational image that fosters collective mobilisation, *Untouchable* offers a realist and critical perspective that foregrounds individual suffering and social constraint. Together, these novels reveal the Gandhian ideology as both a powerful moral vision and a contested framework for social reform. The interplay between myth and reality not only enriches the understanding of these novels but also underscores the enduring complexity of Gandhian thought in literary and social contexts.



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Conclusion:

This study has comparatively examined Gandhian ideology in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* by focusing on the tension between mythic idealisation and social reality. Both novels engage deeply with Gandhi's ethical and political vision, yet they represent it through distinct narrative approaches. In *Kanthapura*, Gandhian ideology becomes a collective and mythic force that inspires unity, sacrifice, and resistance against colonial rule. Through oral narration and cultural symbolism, Gandhi emerges as a moral and spiritual leader whose influence shapes the village community's consciousness. In contrast, *Untouchable* presents a realist and critical perspective centred on caste oppression and individual suffering. Anand acknowledges the ethical significance of Gandhi's ideas while simultaneously questioning their ability to transform entrenched social inequalities.

Together, these novels present Gandhian ideology as both a mobilising moral force and a contested framework for social change. The contrast between collective faith and individual suffering highlights the difficulty of translating ethical ideals into practice. This comparative re-reading shows that Gandhian thought continues to invite both affirmation and critique through its engagement with evolving social realities. The ongoing tension between idealism and reality further sustains its significance in contemporary discussions of social justice and ethical transformation. As these novels reveal, Gandhian ideology is not a fixed doctrine but a dynamic discourse continuously shaped by the complexities of human experience.

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