

Revisiting the Indian Struggle of independence through the lens of Gandhian Philosophy: A Critical Reading of *Ahimsa* by Supriya Kelkar

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to examine an English novel *Ahimsa*, by Supriya Kelkar, which enacts the chronicle of the Indian freedom movement and attempts to assess Gandhian ideology's instillation in India's individual and social life. Gandhian concept of non-violence and views of social and communal harmony greatly impacted Indian Social life and remain the cockpit of discussion in the present time, too. Supriya Kelkar seeds the story on her personal family life of previous generations and tries to present it through the eye of a ten-year-old protagonist, Anjali. The multiple diversities based on religion, caste, language, etc. and inequality and discrimination empowered on their bases in India were some crucial social issues Gandhi tried to address in his preaching and practice. It is interesting to examine why Gandhi brought social harmony during political freedom. Why Gandhi wanted Hindu-Muslim unity during the freedom movement, so Gandhi implemented his novel technique, Satyagraha, to fight against British Rule. he realized that India must unite to be free from British rule, so Gandhi intensely focused on Hindu-Muslim unity and communal harmony. Gandhi's ideology held inclusion of all sections of the societies, whether it is rich, poor, intellectual, downtrodden, or harijan (Dalits) at the prime position and sternly believed it social harmony attained through the inculcation of this ideology would create a society deserving political freedom. The matters remained hot topics in those days as well as present days. The paper also tries to investigate the novelist's attempts to deliberate on the inability or hardships faced by the people facing oppression, injustice, and violence to keep to the path of peaceful struggle of ahimsa.

Key Words: Ahimsa, Social harmony, inequality, social inclusion, violence, non-violence.

I

After seven decades of Indian independence, a person faces discriminations on the grounds of caste, creed and social inequality, injustice, oppression and violence showcases the poor plight of Indian Society. All these social evils are still prevalent in society and become challenges to social harmony. Such happening in past and present times has taken the form of movements. Historically, movement takes place to protest social-political issues. The primary concerns of such a movement are to ascertain equality, justice, freedom, against oppressive tyranny and the abolition of social and political evils. In order to tackle such issues, every movement has their own ways to protest it. The Indian freedom movement too is such a movement that took its massive form for fighting against the tyranny of the British Rule. Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a political thinker and a social philosopher out of it. Gandhi addressed many social and political evils in his unique non-violent way. If we examine the Gandhian path of non-violent resistance, we find that for Gandhi the only aim was not just the attainment of political freedom for India, but his visions looked for the enactment of the harmonious social order where people live on the core of equality and free from

any kind of prejudicial practices. The present paper deals with how Gandhian ideology and his ideals impacted upon the minds of natives of India and led them to inculcate them in their personal lives as it is woven into her novel *Ahimsa* by Supriya Kelkar. As the protagonist is a ten-year-old girl, Anjali, it also gives us glimpses of the impact of Gandhian ideology in shaping children's minds in their formative years.

Gandhi is rightly known for his advocacy of nonviolence and love for his dedication to the autonomy, dignity, and freedom of everyone, as well as his quest for individual and social harmony. (Ronald 117)

M.K. Gandhi was an eminent figure of the Colonial Era. He has made a journey from ordinary to extraordinary stand in this period. For this reason, Gandhi remained the most important and leading figure worldwide because of his great deeds and practicality. Gandhi gave the most precious approaches to solving problems and fighting against oppressive authority and social evils. These approaches are non-violence, Satyagraha, civil disobedience and non-cooperation. Gandhi's experiment and practice of truthful behaviour radically impacted not only the Indian freedom movement but also every corner of the world in order to fight against injustice and social evils.

The History of Human civilization is replete with the stories of war, violent war where the enemies seek to wipe the existence of their opponent from the very roots. For a considerable passage of time this was the only way of conflict resolution. In certain religious practices there were some alternative ways, but they were limited to the individual passive resistance. Gandhi's experimentation with the truth gave some extraordinary shape to it by making 'non-violent way of struggle' a tool to deal with conflict resolution. Non-violence, in the Gandhian ideology, is a device to mollify problems. It means a commitment to not harm and renunciation from the will to damage and harm. For Gandhi, truth is the goal to achieve, but non-violent action is the means to achieve that goal. In Gandhi's views truth is more of a remote phenomenon; reaching It is a constant conscious process and that can be reached through the non-violent means of love, pity, and compassion towards the self and the other, the inner and the outer, the individual and the social. Gandhian ideology clearly holds that the change to the existing problems of greed, exploitation and cruelty to others caused by colonialism, caste system, capitalism, and religious hypocrisy, then non-violent means accompanying the noble sentiments of love, pity and compassion would only be the real road. Gandhi preached and practiced this principle and paved the way and tried his best to demonstrate that the way of non-violence and truth, of love and equality, though it appears tough and difficult, is not the impossible one.

Thus, Gandhi has been successful in drawing out non-violence to public utilization. Gandhi logically shows that non-violent behaviour requires more effort than the violent one. His views clearly hold that the followers of non-violence should be equally good at heart, hand, and mind. He should be humble and service-loving. He should be a figure who understands his social responsibility and works genuinely to fulfill it. Gandhi firmly holds that this approach is the only means to establish the peaceful and harmonious social order.

Gandhi's visions on social challenges of India bred, along with the principle of non-violence, the constructive programs viz. communal unity, removal of untouchability, khadi, basic education, etc., which were crucial for bringing about the social harmony; a much needed element for the Indian freedom movement. Gandhi strongly believed not just political freedom but social freedom from such base and vile notions was inevitable for the Indian society. Along with the

political tyranny, the communal tension, caste discrimination, etc. were the area which demanded attention. Thus, Gandhi's Indian freedom movement deals with both outside and inside.

"From his early youth onward, right up to the last breath of his earthly existence, Gandhiji assiduously worked and prayed for the achievement of communal unity which he considered indispensable for the freedom, growth and prosperity of the nation, progress of the world and the cause of non-violence"(Rani 280). India has diversified based on religion, caste and language, creating disharmony among people. During the freedom movement, communal conflict, caste discrimination, and social issues prevalent in Indian society were big challenges to getting political freedom. Gandhi emphasizes in *Hind Swaraj* that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them" (Gandhi 27). According to Gandhi, communal disharmony was one of the causes responsible for establishing the British Empire in India. According to Gandhi, to free India from the British Empire, Indian people must be united and non-violent; because it was a time when communal or social harmony was needed to fight against the British rule.

Gandhiji realized the imperative need to unite the divergent forces of the Indian population. He had fought against social discrimination in South Africa. He came to realize that as long as untouchability was not removed, India could not become strong and united. Social, religious, and economic freedom was the condition precedent before India could be freed from the clutches of British imperialism. (Rani 209)

Gandhi's influence among the people was so massive and widespread that millions of Indians were ready to throw their personal life and interest at one call of Gandhi. He was seen and hailed as a 'Mahatma' and millions of Indians took up the way of life laid down by him discarding the century long social practices which worked only to weaken the social harmony. The result of Gandhian influence is also witnessed in literature of India and worldwide during Gandhi's life span. In almost all Indian vernacular literature there were class of writers who were greatly enamored by the Gandhian philosophy and the result of it is greatly engraved influence of Gandhi on their works. In almost all there is an epoch labeled as 'Gandhian Era', and even till present day books weave Gandhian philosophy and try to examine its veneers.

II

Critical Reading of *Ahimsa*

Supriya Kelkar weaves Gandhian ideologies in her literary piece *Ahimsa*. The title "Ahimsa" i.e., non-violence, a core term of Gandhian philosophy, echoes her plans to seed her story on the Gandhian ideology. Here, Supriya nicely delineates and captures India's condition during the freedom movement. She tries to present the story from 10-year-old Anjali's perspective. It shows that during the freedom movement, how Indian people and their personal family life got tossed in the winds of political movement on the personal levels and how at the community level the issues like caste discrimination, communal tension, etc. prevalent in the society created. In the review of the book, N. H. Senzai truly observes:

Kelkar gives us a front-row seat at a critical moment in history with skill and emotion as we journey through India with Anjali, a feisty, inquisitive daughter of a freedom fighter who strives to stay true to Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, ahimsa, while tackling issues of

colonialism, caste, women's rights, and communal violence at the eve of the country's independence. (Senzai)

Ahimsa is an English novel written by Supriya Kelkar in 2017. *Ahimsa* is considered as historical fiction in English literature. The story of *Ahimsa* moves around Navrangpura village. We can see that Supriya Kelkar tries to illustrate the freedom movement from political and social outlooks. Thus, she portrayed India's freedom movement from various stances. It is not only about the freedom movement, but it also focuses on communal tension, caste discrimination, lynching, conditions of persons in prison in the backdrop of the Quit India movement. *Ahimsa* presents a detailed picture of local leaders who work as freedom fighters. Anjali and her mother had adopted the Gandhian way inculcating the principles of truth, non-violence, Satyagraha, Swadeshi Karan, and love for humanity in their personal lives as well as trying to advocate them among society in general. The novel documents the struggle of Anjali and her Mother and their quest for social welfare, self-suffering, and non-violent behaviour in order to establish a harmonious society and thus tries to examine the efficacies of the Gandhian precepts through a case study.

Anjali, the narrator of the story is a ten year old girl who presents the preview from her view point. This scheme tries to propagate that even the imagination and cognition of values too have a deep rooted impact of the Gandhian ideology. The struggle of Mohan as an untouchable boy and the relationship between Irfan and Anjali caters a replica of the Indian social construct consisting of different castes and creeds. Anjali emerges as an insightful and determined girl. Her imagination gets ignited on her knowledge that her mother had left her job as a British officer and joined the freedom movement. Supriya portrays the transformation of Anjali over the course of time. Initially, Anjali appears to be an ordinary girl who enjoys wearing foreign clothes and believes it a normal code of conduct in maintaining distance from the Untouchables. When Anjali's mother announced she was a freedom fighter, she was unhappy because of her prejudice about freedom fighters. She thinks, "Is this what my life is going to be like? Will my family lose our bungalow and be forced to live in a tiny house? Will we become poor?" (Kelkar 40). But towards the end, Anjali emerges strong and confident and takes pride in taking her mother's work further to voice against oppressive authority and unjust treatment of the poor and down trodden classes at the hand of so called higher classes. One can find her quest for social harmony and upliftment of lower caste people.

Gandhi's mechanism for the conflict management with his precept of non violent agitation against the tyrannies of oppressive administrative system and the social union through the codes of equality and fraternity in the diversified social order composes the very base of the novel. And it will be fair to state *Ahimsa* responds to communal tension, caste discrimination, and Tyrannical dominance, which was persistent in the Indian society. Many social reformers have tried to break the notion of untouchability and tried to offer solutions to eliminate communal tension. But Gandhi's exercise attracts attention as he demonstrated that the massive change in the outlook will be possible only through the tiny but stern agreeable steps. For this he undertook intensive practices such as cleaning toilets, started staying with the untouchables to abolish untouchability and fought for their justice at the religious and social fronts. He believed that "if we change ourselves, the tendencies in the world will also change" (77). In the same way, Anjali's mother realizes the agony of untouchables. She undertakes intensive practice like Gandhi to start changing from herself and started to clean the toilet and offered Prasad to Mohan, who is untouchable and used to clean toilets. Through such practices, Anjali's mother tries to break the notion of Untouchability from Anjali's mind and shapes the mindset of Anjali by giving examples of some superstitions. She explains "Those are superstitions, Anjali. They're not facts. They're just tales passed down generation to generation for a societal purpose. You probably aren't supposed to cut your nails at night because

you could get hurt cutting in the dark, or someone could step on the clippings in the dark and get hurt that way too. Not washing your hair one day a week? That is probably meant to conserve water, because girls have long hair that needs a lot of water to wash. This irrational fear of people, calling them Untouchable, that is probably all there just to keep the status quo. To keep things as they are. To not challenge the system. But it's wrong, Anjali. It's just plain wrong" (61). Anjali's mother saw the seed of equality in her mind by emphasizing: "Because your father and I didn't think to challenge the status quo. We were wrong too. But we won't make that mistake again. If all Indians can't even be equal in one another's eyes, how can we blame the British for considering themselves better than us?"(61). By practicing and giving related examples, Anjali's mother makes her think or compare herself to untouchable children who are as old as Anjali. As a result, being a Brahmin girl, she treats Muslims and untouchables as friends, puts great effort into the upliftment of untouchables, and starts educating them.

Gandhi's other prime concern was Hindu-Muslim unity just the abolition of untouchability. Gandhi believed that If Hindu Muslims participate in freedom struggle together, we can get freedom more easily. For instance, Anjali's mother tells Anjali, "Hindus are the grass. Muslims are the water. Mother India needs both to survive," Ma said softly, pointing to the pregnant cow. "If you give her just one," she continued, feeding Nandini grass, "she will still need the other" (136). It clearly shows the quest of Indian people to free India from British rule as well as religious disharmony and social inequality. Keshavji states that "every little bit we do makes a difference. This is a fight for independence on two fronts, inside and out. We must continue to protest the British and their unfair rules. And we must improve our society from within. What good is a free India when its people do not consider their brothers and sisters their equals? Social reform and civil disobedience must go hand in hand. For when all Indians are finally equal, no one can stop us. Freedom will one day be ours. It will be the sweetest nectar we drink, and we will drink it together, my friends" (69).

Anjali and her mother dealt with both these external and internal struggles. To tackle such issues, Anjali and her mother started small changes from themselves. They faced hardship and struggle while making changes still like Gandhi, they persisted with their mission and did not give up, nor faltered. For example, when Anjali's mother was jailed, Anjali continued her mother's mission without losing hope. Through her mother and Anjali's life, Supriya Kelkar redefines the concept of ahimsa, to her it does not just mean the abstention from any violence and injury, but in the broader perspective it is creating a social milieu which annihilates the very notions of inequality, under privileged and canons of power.

In the novel writer tries to show how it is impossible for the poor and downtrodden to adhere to any sort of idealism. Gandhi's views "if we change ourselves, the tendencies in the world will also change" is very much appealing and fascinating to those who enjoy some social status and have sounder means to support their being well, but for those who are in the grips of hardships and in the claws of dire poverty and have to face humiliations and insults at every go of life, it is their prime concerns to retain their existence; and in such plight to expect them to follow the idealistic norms is something very high of expectation. Anjali and her mother both are staunch followers of Gandhi and they tried to inspire the untouchable to change the status *quo*, prevalent in society and to come out boldly to challenge the notion of untouchability, etc. On the contrary, the Dalit lady shares her bitter experience of getting punished for drawing water from public well. Now, it is obvious that the well cannot be owned by anyone as it might have been built through the investment of wealth by the Rich, but the Poor must have invested their labour in building it, and the water is the gift of Nature, still the authoritarian power game does not allow her to have access to it. Thus, for them change would be not just be something remote to pine for but in fact a scary phenomenon.

And her statement rings the bell which the novelist wants to ring “*maybe people like you Brahmins can do what you want and make great changes. But not us*” (77).

Gandhi used the term ‘Harijan’ for untouchable with a view to eradicating the taboo status ascribed to this clan and to eliminate the social status *quo* which had kept them as they were for a considerable period of time, and to create a novel vision in the society in general to look at them with a humane touch and from the gaze of fraternity. Supriya too employs the same term and in this vein Anjali and her mother used the term ‘Harijan’ instead of untouchable to bring change in society. Here, taking the idealistic notion to the grounds of stark realism, the novelist puts it to the acid test. Mohan, who is burning in the agony of being the low caste, from his perspective turns this idealism to null when he pours his heart out. To him no charm or magic appears in this new term ‘Harijan’. He is sure it is not powerful enough to bring the change this idealism seeks to bring in the society. He clearly asserts his viewpoint that “**everyone will still think of us as dirty and beneath them. Changing what you call someone doesn’t fix the problems behind the name**” (80). (Emphasis Added)

In short, the novel minutely examines the social order and assesses them as being exploitative and allowing privileges to those who are in the higher strata, the order created through mere chance of birth. The novelist also tries to question the political, social, or economic infrastructures where prominence is distributed through one’s caste-based identity. The Indian freedom struggle which forms the bedrock of the novel is also examined through the ideal-practical dichotomy. The novelist succeeds in bringing to notice that the vessel of idealistic visions when it touches the waters of reality, it either doesn’t find the expected ease of floating or in some cases sinks to the bottom. Overall, the need for the eradication of all such exploitative canons, and it is through some more congenial measures, emerges as the prime concern that the novelist wants the people to ponder over. The agony of the untouchable through several characters, a scavenger-boy named Mohan and several other children who belong to lower caste and the caste-based discriminations and humiliation the encounter brings to the fore the hypocritical character of society. Another point that the novelist tries to make visible is that Gandhian ideology of nonviolence has its essence in not constructing hatred against British people, but against the colonial system that exploited or humiliated others. In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, greatest charity. The essence is seen in what Gandhi says “If I am a follower of Ahimsa, I must love my enemy. I must apply the same rules to the wrong-doer who is my enemy or a stranger to me, as I would to my wrong-doing father or son.” (Gandhi)

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