

**Revisiting Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand and R. K. Narayan,
“Big Three” of Indo English Literature.**

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The recognition and discussion of Indo-English novels starts with Raja Rao (1908–2006), Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), and R.K. Narayan (1906–2000). William Walsh, the famous English critic, called them the Big Three of Indo-English literature. They burst onto the Indian literary scene in the thirties with hardly a difference of a few years. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was published in 1938; Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* was published five years earlier, in 1933; and R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* was published in 1935.

Their literary careers were launched when Mahatma Gandhi was fighting tooth and nail for Indian independence and eliminating the atrocious practice of untouchability. Gandhi was a charismatic man, and such was his charisma that he could rouse Indians from their inertness and take to the streets to drive away the British from India and rid society of its age-old, atrocious practice of untouchability.

Raja Rao was so taken up with Gandhi that he recreated his prototype in his first novel. His Gandhian prototype, Moorthy, a brahmin youth expected to be a saheb, lives in a typical South Indian village called *Kanthapura*. Though a small village, it is, like all villages in India, divided along caste lines; it has a Brahmin quarter, a Potters quarter, a Weavers quarter, a Pariah quarter, etc. During his studies, Moorthy came to know Gandhi's views on untouchability and his ways to abolish it, and he became a Gandhian. He was genuinely inspired to improve the lot of the Pariah community. He started visiting their quarter and mixing with them. He decided to educate them, and he started holding classes for them. This irritated the brahmin community in *Kanthapura*, and it plotted ways and means to excommunicate him from its caste.

But Moorthy remained undeterred. Like Gandhi, he also started challenging the British authority by organizing satyagrahas and non-cooperation movements. His anti-government activities invited arrests, and he became a jailbird. But such was his honesty and enthusiasm that even in his absence, people carried on satyagrahas. Like Gandhi, he succeeds in transforming people into heroes fighting against oppression.

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao recreates all the colors of village life. He does not allow English to be a stumbling block. He takes it in stride and keeps the tempo of his story going. He is not squeamish about using English the way the English use it. He accepts it because it suits him. He does not mind that English idioms and expressions are given in Indian versions. He is easy if “nip it in the bud is nip it in the seed” or “why do you bother me” is “why are you eating? My mind”. He is happy with his rolling prose.

It is his way of fighting colonialism.

Mulk Raj Anand, too, writes about the problem of untouchability in his first novel, *Untouchable*. He writes about a day in the life of an untouchable youth called Bakha, attached to British barracks.

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Bakha's day starts with abuses hurled at him by his father for getting late for his duties. Bakha is used to them. However, he cleans toilets with great alacrity, and when he has finished with toilet cleaning, he heads towards the main road of the town. He meets with a series of shocking experiences.

A nondescript man in the crowd starts shouting that Bakha has polluted him, slaps him, and disappears. At a temple, the priest shouts that the temple has been polluted. A lot of people gather there and beat Bakha mercilessly. His sister, Suhana, tells him that the same priest molested him. When Bakha returns home and tells his father what happened to him in the street, his father scolds him for being careless and drives him away from his home. Out in the open, Bakha meets a priest who wants to convert him to Christianity. Later, he attends a lecture by Mahatma Gandhi, who calls untouchables Harijans, the children of God. Gandhi says, "I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism, and if I should be born again, I should be so, not as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisha, Shudra, but as an outcast, as an untouchable." He further says, "I love scavenging." While getting out of the crowd, Bakha comes across an anglicized Indian Muslim and a well-dressed Indian poet. He finds them locked in a debate. While the Muslim was debunking Gandhi, the poet was defending Gandhi and saying that if India is backward, it is because it has neglected the machine. He says the flush system can solve the issue of untouchability. Bakha is impressed by what Gandhi said and what the poet said, but the conflict in his soul is not over, and he walks on with nowhere to go.

Anand's *Untouchable* is a moving account of the insults and humiliations of untouchables told with sagacity and confidence.

While his two peers wrote about social issues, R.K. Narayan wrote about the lives and manners of people living in a small South Indian imaginary village called Malgudi. He wrote about their quirks and foibles, traditions, customs, beliefs, ups and downs in their lives, and their responses to them.

The Guide is his most famous novel. It starts with Raju selling cigarettes and matchboxes to wayfarers at the wayside hut shop of his father. When a railway station comes up in the vicinity, he starts moving there and becomes a vendor and then a tourist guide. One day, a couple arrives in Malgudi. The woman is called Rosie. She is vivacious, and the man whom Raju calls Marco is curt and self-centered. Soon, Raju and Rosie become lovers. The husband learns about Rosie's affair and leaves Malgudi without Rosie. Raju takes her home.

He is so possessed by Rosie that he neglects his shop and profession and lands in financial trouble. He is sued for bankruptcy. The lovers are forced to give public performances and soon become rich and famous and start living in style.

One day Raju gets a document for Rosie's signature for retrieving a box of jewelry from the bank. Raju is tempted and forges Rosie's signature. Marco sues him for forgery, and Raju is sent to jail for two years. When he is out, he takes refuge in a temple, where he is taken for a saint. Raju is reluctant to play the role but keeps it because of the generous offerings and veneration of the people. Soon there is a drought in the region, and people

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expect him to perform a miracle. Raju accepts to go on fast until it rains, much against his will. He suffers from hunger and wants to steal food, but is unable to do so because of the people around him. He becomes weak, has a high fever, and lies, dreaming of rain. The writer attributes the vicissitudes in Raju's life to fate, a very common belief among Indians. The Guide became very popular and is studied as a text by students of Indo-English literature.

'The Big Three' of Indo-English literature resolved the doubts about Indians' ability to write in English, ended the drought of Indian writing in English, nourished its growth, and gave it a standing that is winning laurels in world literature today.