

# The Influence of Indian Philosophy on Indian English Writers

Priya Pandey

Guest Faculty, English Department  
Government T. R. S. College, Rewa, M.P.

**Abstract:** *Indian English literature, emerging from the colonial encounter, uniquely integrates indigenous philosophical traditions with the English novel form. This paper examines the profound influence of three pillars of Indian philosophy—Advaita Vedanta, Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of non-violence and truth, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's radical anti-caste thought—on selected Indian English writers. Through a focused analysis of Raja Rao's Kanthapura and metaphysical novels, R.K. Narayan's Waiting for the Mahatma, and Arundhati Roy's engagement with Ambedkar in her fiction and non-fiction (including her introduction to Annihilation of Caste), the study demonstrates how these philosophies shape narrative structure, character development, thematic concerns, and linguistic innovation. Vedanta provides Raja Rao with a metaphysics of non-duality (advaita), transforming the novel into spiritual sadhana. Gandhian principles infuse Narayan's work with ethical realism and national awakening. Ambedkar's call for annihilation of caste empowers Roy and Dalit voices to critique graded inequality and imagine social justice. Employing qualitative literary analysis and close reading of primary texts alongside secondary scholarship, the research argues that Indian English writers do not merely borrow Western forms but indigenize them through philosophical depth, creating a hybrid yet authentically Indian aesthetic. The findings highlight the enduring relevance of these philosophies in addressing contemporary issues of identity, caste, and spirituality in postcolonial India. This paper contributes to postcolonial and comparative literary studies by underscoring philosophy as a creative force in Indian English fiction.*

**Keywords:** Indian English literature, Advaita Vedanta, Gandhian philosophy, Ambedkarite thought, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, postcolonial novel, anti-caste literature, non-duality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has long been a site of cultural negotiation, where colonial legacies intersect with indigenous epistemologies. Unlike Western realism, which often prioritizes individualism and linear progress, Indian writers in English frequently draw upon native philosophical systems to explore existential, social, and political realities. The three philosophies under scrutiny—Vedanta (particularly Advaita as expounded by Shankaracharya), Gandhi's synthesis of ahimsa, satya, and satyagraha, and Ambedkar's rationalist critique of caste rooted in Buddhism and modernity—represent distinct yet interconnected strands of Indian thought: metaphysical, ethical-political, and socio-revolutionary.

Raja Rao (1908–2006), a pioneer of the form, explicitly positioned literature as sadhana (spiritual discipline). His novels embody the quest for the Absolute (Brahman), blending Puranic narrative with Advaita non-duality. R.K. Narayan (1906–2001), the chronicler of Malgudi, subtly weaves Gandhian ideals into everyday Indian life, portraying the freedom struggle not as mere politics but as moral transformation. Arundhati Roy (b. 1961), a contemporary voice, extends this legacy by engaging Ambedkar's radical vision in her essays and fiction, challenging the "graded inequality" that persists in democratic India.

This influence is not ornamental; it restructures the novel itself. Rao's circular, digressive style mirrors Upanishadic inquiry; Narayan's understated irony critiques yet affirms Gandhian ethics; Roy's polyphonic narratives amplify Dalit assertion. The paper limits its scope to these representative writers while referencing broader Dalit literature inspired by Ambedkar. By examining primary texts alongside critical scholarship, it demonstrates how Indian philosophy enables these authors to "write back" to empire while reclaiming cultural sovereignty. The study is timely in an era of rising

caste violence and spiritual revivalism, revisiting these influences reveals literature's role in fostering samata (equality) and moksha (liberation).

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in literary studies. The primary method is close textual analysis of selected works: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960); R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955); and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) along with her introduction to B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (2014 edition). Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs—non-duality, ahimsa, and caste annihilation—while comparative analysis traces inter-philosophical dialogues (e.g., Gandhi vs. Ambedkar on village vs. urban justice).

Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and essays (e.g., analyses of Advaita in Rao, Gandhian ideology in Narayan, and Roy's Ambedkar engagement). Data collection involved archival review of philosophical texts (Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Ambedkar's writings) and critical commentaries. No empirical surveys or quantitative metrics were used, as the focus is hermeneutic: interpreting how philosophy informs form and content.

Ethical considerations include respectful representation of Dalit perspectives and avoidance of Brahminical bias. Limitations: scope restricted to three authors for depth; translations of Dalit works consulted where English originals unavailable. Validity is ensured through cross-referencing multiple critics and direct textual evidence. This methodology aligns with postcolonial literary theory (Ashcroft et al.) and Indian hermeneutics, treating literature as *sadhana* rather than mere artifact. Vedanta (Advaita) and Its Influence on Raja Rao's Fiction Raja Rao's oeuvre exemplifies the seamless fusion of Advaita Vedanta with the English novel. He regarded writing as spiritual discipline (*sadhana*), a metaphysical quest for the Absolute. In his own words, literature emerges from "the metaphysical life" (as cited in critical analyses). Protagonists pursue Jnana Yoga (knowledge), Karma Yoga (action), or Bhakti Yoga (devotion), paths outlined in the Bhagavad Gita. *Kanthapura* (1938), Rao's debut and a cornerstone of Indian English fiction, is structured as a *sthala-purana*—a legendary village history mirroring Puranic form with digressions, songs, and oral storytelling. The epigraph from the Gita ("Whosoever there is misery and ignorance, I come") frames Gandhi as an avatar of Truth. Protagonist Moorthy, a young Brahmin, introduces Gandhian *satyagraha* to the village but experiences deeper spiritual awakening. His "conversion" culminates in chanting Shankaracharya's Advaita mantra: "Sivoham, Sivoham. I am Siva. I am Siva. Siva am I." This moment dissolves subject-object duality, affirming *atman* as Brahman (non-duality). The narrative technique itself embodies Vedanta. Linear colonial realism yields to episodic, circular storytelling—illusion (*maya*) resolved in unity. The village deity *Kenchamma* symbolizes local *Shakti*, while Moorthy's arrest and the village's destruction parallel the rope-serpent metaphor: political upheaval reveals underlying spiritual oneness. Critics note Rao's "Kannadized" English captures Indian ethos, Sanskritized syntax mirroring Vedantic abstraction.

This influence intensifies in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), a *Maha Purana*. Protagonist Rama, a Brahmin scholar, embodies Advaita: "the self is a part of Truth, as the wave is a part of the sea, and that all separateness is illusion, like the illusion in which a rope is mistaken for a serpent." His marriage to Madeleine (Western, dualistic) fails; union with Savithri hints at instinctive Truth. Philosophical disquisitions, Upanishadic quotations, and global pilgrimages underscore the quest for *moksha*. Narrative circularity—ending where it begins—mirrors Brahman's eternal nature.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), Bhakti predominates via the "cat-way" metaphor (kitten carried by mother-cat = divine grace). Upanishadic dialogues question perception: "Is there seeing first or the object first?" The protagonist crosses the "wall" of illusion to realize cosmic unity, echoing Chandogya Upanishad. Even in *Comrade Kirillov* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, Advaita critiques Marxism and rationalism, affirming spiritual love over contradiction. Rao's metaphysics thus indigenizes the novel: Western form becomes vehicle for *jnana*. As one critic observes, his work is "best understood as a part of the Indian tradition" (*literariness.org* analysis). Vedanta not only themes but structures his fiction, offering readers *sadhana*—a path to self-realization beyond colonial mimicry.

Gandhian Philosophy and Its Influence on R.K. Narayan's Fiction R.K. Narayan, the gentlest chronicler of Malgudi, embeds Gandhian ethics—ahimsa (non-violence), *satya* (truth), and self-realization—into seemingly apolitical narratives. Though often seen as detached, Narayan subtly critiques and celebrates the freedom struggle through personal transformation.

Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) is paradigmatic. The title itself evokes spiritual waiting (sadhana). Protagonist Sriram, an orphaned youth living with his grandmother in Malgudi, encounters Bharati, a Gandhian disciple. Love and politics converge: Sriram joins the Quit India movement not from ideology but infatuation. Gandhi appears as a “dream-like heroic figure” whose presence brings calm yet demands rigorous self-scrutiny. Key Gandhian tenets drive the plot. Gandhi tells Sriram: “Before you aspire to drive the British from the country, you must drive every vestige of violence from your system... you must train yourself to become a hundred percent ahimsa soldier.” This echoes ahimsa as inner discipline. Sriram’s transformation—from carefree boy to satyagrahi—mirrors the novel’s exploration of love, non-violence, and freedom as unity. Bharati embodies Gandhian femininity: disciplined yet compassionate. Their romance gains “new dimension” against national allegiance.

Narayan’s irony humanizes Gandhi without deification. The Mahatma’s camp scenes blend asceticism with everyday absurdity (spinning charkha, village meetings). Yet the novel affirms Gandhian ideals: Sriram learns truth-seeking transcends politics. Critics note the structural design mirrors Gandhian ideology—“love, non-violence and freedom as unity” against colonial backdrop.

Echoes appear in Swami and Friends (1935), where schoolboys resist missionary education, echoing Gandhian cultural assertion. In later works like The Vendor of Sweets (1967), Jagan’s charkha-spinning and satyagraha reflect Gandhian swadeshi and self-realization.

Narayan’s understated style—simple English, Malgudi microcosm—makes Gandhian philosophy accessible. Unlike Rao’s metaphysical density, Narayan domesticates it: politics becomes personal ethics. This hybrid realism critiques blind following while celebrating moral awakening, influencing generations of readers to internalize ahimsa in daily life. Gandhian thought thus elevates Narayan’s “ordinary” fiction to profound national allegory. (1,156 words)

Ambedkarite Philosophy and Its Influence on Arundhati Roy and Dalit English Literature

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s philosophy—rational annihilation of caste, constitutional morality, and Buddhist egalitarianism—marks the most revolutionary strand. Unlike Vedanta’s metaphysics or Gandhi’s reformism, Ambedkar demands structural destruction of “graded inequality.”

Arundhati Roy’s engagement exemplifies this. In her 2014 introduction to Annihilation of Caste (originally a 1936 undelivered speech), titled “The Doctor and the Saint,” Roy contrasts Ambedkar with Gandhi. Ambedkar, heir to anticaste traditions (Bhakti poets, Phule, Periyar), views Hindu society as “a multi-storeyed tower with no staircase.” Caste disables rebellion: “The lower classes... could not bear arms... They were condemned to be lowly.”

Roy quotes Ambedkar: “Gandhiji, I have no Homeland. No Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land.” She critiques Gandhi’s defense of varna (“Caste is another name for control”) and village romanticism. Ambedkar’s utopia is urban justice (Prabuddha Bharat), not Gandhi’s “oceanic circles.” Roy links this to her fiction: The Ministry of Utmost Happiness features hijra and Dalit characters navigating caste violence, echoing Ambedkar’s call to “discard the shastras.”

Ambedkar’s influence extends to Dalit literature in English (translations or originals). Writers like Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Bama (Karukku), and Sharankumar Limbale draw directly: “Educate, agitate, organize.” Dalit texts reject Brahminical aesthetics for raw assertion, autobiography as protest. Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” inspires rejection of shastras and embrace of equality: “Choose any religion which gives you equality... I will not die a Hindu.” Roy’s own Syrian Christian background exposed latent caste; her essay radicalizes English readers. In Dalit English writing, Ambedkarite thought fosters “literature of protest”—self-pride, revolt against servitude. Critics note he is “the ultimate inspiration for Dalit literature,” shaping form (testimony over myth) and content (lived oppression).

Thus, Ambedkar transforms Indian English literature from spiritual quest or ethical realism to socio-political weapon. Roy and Dalit voices enact his constitutional morality, ensuring democracy addresses the “dung heap” of inequality.

### III. CONCLUSION

Vedanta, Gandhian ethics, and Ambedkarite radicalism have indelibly shaped Indian English literature. Rao’s non-dual metaphysics, Narayan’s moral realism, and Roy/ Dalit assertion demonstrate philosophy’s creative power. These writers indigenize the novel, resisting colonial form while addressing India’s deepest fissures—illusion, violence, caste. The synthesis is powerful: Vedanta offers inner liberation, Gandhi ethical action, Ambedkar social equality. Together, they envision moksha and samata. In contemporary India, amid caste atrocities and identity politics, these influences

remain vital. Future research could expand to other authors (Mulk Raj Anand, Perumal Murugan) or digital Dalit voices.

Indian English literature thus emerges not as derivative but as philosophical sadhana—a bridge between ancient wisdom and modern justice.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Edited with an introduction by Arundhati Roy, Navayana, 2014.
- [2]. Narayan, R.K. *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Indian Thought Publications, 1955.
- [3]. Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. New Directions, 1966.
- [4]. Rao, Raja. *The Serpent and the Rope*. John Murray, 1960.
- [5]. Roy, Arundhati. "The Doctor and the Saint." *The Caravan*, 28 Feb. 2014, <https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/doctor-and-saint>.
- [6]. Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.
- [7]. "Analysis of Raja Rao's Novels." *Literariness.org*, 29 June 2020, <https://literariness.org/2020/06/29/analysis-of-raja-raos-novels/>.
- [8]. Gemmill, Janet P. "Dualities and Non-Duality in Raja Rao." *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1983, pp. 1-10.
- [9]. Kulkarni, Sandhya R. "Influence of Gandhi's Freedom Struggle in the Works of R.K. Narayan." *Shikshan Sanshodhan*, vol. 7, no. 4, Apr. 2024, pp. 1-10.
- [10]. Menozzi, Filippo. "Arundhati Roy and the Dalit Perspective." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 52, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1-15.
- [11]. Oza, Preeti. "Literature as Protest in Dalit Writings in India and Black Literature in America." *ScholarWorks*, California State University, 2010.
- [12]. Sankaran, Chitra. *Myth Connections: The Use of Hindu Myths and Philosophies in R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao*. 2nd ed., Peter Lang, 2007.
- [13]. Tiffin, Helen. "Advaita Vedānta in Three Novels of Raja Rao." *Religion and Literature*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1983, pp. 1-20.