

*A Portrayal of Quit India Movement in Indian English Fiction*  
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## **A Portrayal of Quit India Movement in Indian English Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

*Like the writers of different Indian regional languages, Indian English novelists have also depicted in their writings the "Quit India" Movement and the savage repression that followed in its wake. While in some of the Indian English novels - Umrao Bahadur's **Hard Times** (n.d.), R.K. Narayan's **Waiting for the Mahatma** (1955), and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's **The World is My Village** (1983) - the Quit India Movement figures along with other major political events of the Gandhian struggle for independence, in Kamala Markandaya's **Some Inner Fury** (1957), and Khushwant Singh's **I shall Not Hear the Nighingale** (1959), it forms the significant background, leaving its fateful impact on the family dreams treated. Aamir Ali's **Conflict** (1947), however, depicts it as its dominant theme. Giving the genesis of the Quit India Movement, the author describes how after the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Congress Working Committee passes "Quit India" resolution and Mahatma Gandhi gives the call of "Do or Die".*

**Keywords:** *Savage repression, Genesis, Cripps Mission, Resolution*

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## **Introduction**

Umrao Bahadur in his novel, **Hard Times**, portrays the participation of Muslims of North India in the National Movement. Finding the British rulers adamant to perpetuate their rule in India and getting disillusioned with the communal politics of the Muslim League, Khan Bahadur Saghir Hussain denounces his title of C.I.E. and plunges in the National struggle for freedom. His son Aslam and daughter Sakina also join student freedom fighters of their college. They hold peaceful demonstration and take out non-violent processions to protest against the mass arrest of national leaders in the wake of Quit India Movement. The indiscriminate firing by the police and military troops on the peaceful agitators results in the death of Sakina, Aslam and their other colleagues.

Giving the genesis of the Quit India Movement, the author describes how after the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Congress Working Committee passes "Quit India" resolution and Mahatma Gandhi gives the call of "Do or Die". Incensed by the danger of the National agitation on a large scale, the Imperialist rulers arrest the Congress leaders from different parts of India. The arrest of the National leaders rouses Indian people to wrath and indignation and there break out agitations all over the country against the British rule in India. As the frenzy of the people rises higher and higher, "the news of cutting the electric and telephone wires, removal of rails and derailment of trains, and looting of post offices and destruction of public buildings"<sup>1</sup> begins to pour in from different parts of the country. The situation grows from bad to worse because of the lack of proper guidance, "all the principal and accredited leaders having been taken into arrest and removed to unknown places."<sup>2</sup> The Government uses police and military forces to repress the agitation by inflicting ruthless atrocities on people and killing them in a large number. The savagery and bestiality of the military lets loose the region of terror in the country.

R.K. Narayan in his novel, **Waiting for Mahatma**, describes the powerful impact of the Quit India Movement on the people of the South India. He writes :

The Mahatma had in his famous resolution of August 1942 said : "Britain must quit India, and the phrase had the potency of a mantra or a magic formula. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, people cried 'Quit India'. The Home Secretary grew uneasy at the sound of it. It became a prohibited phrase in polite society. After Mahatma uttered the phrase, he was put in prison; but the phrase took life and flourished, and did ultimately

produce enough power to send the British away. There was not a blank wall in the whole country which did not carry the message. Wherever one turned one saw “Quit India”.<sup>3</sup>

Sriram, the central character in the novel, though a Gandhian volunteer, joins hands with his revolutionary friend Jagdish after the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi and indulges in the acts of sabotage in South Indian villages :

In association with Jagdish and under his expert guidance, Sriram did a variety of jobs which he hoped would help the country in its struggle for freedom : he set fire to the records in half a dozen law courts in different villages; he derailed a couple of trains and paralysed the work in various schools; he exploded a crude bomb which tore off the main door of an agricultural research station, tarred out ‘V’ for victory and wrote “Quit India” over the emblem.<sup>4</sup>

Sriram goes underground in a deserted hilly region and along with his revolutionary friends uses two-way Japanese radios to record and propagate the speeches and messages of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose among people and soldiers. He is, however, arrested as he goes to his village to attend the funeral of his grandmother.

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas in his novel, **The World is My Village**, describes how Anwar, the Reporter of **National Herald**, goes to Bombay along with his American journalist friend Robert Mills, to cover the news of the session of All India Congress Committee as it passes the historic resolution of “Quit India”. The mass arrest of the national leaders sparks of political disturbances and acts of sabotage all over the country. The quit India Movement gains momentum under the guidance of the underground socialist leaders, Aruna Asaf Ali, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan who has escaped from Hazaribagh jail.

Kamala Markandaya also in her novel, **Some Inner Fury**, deals with the terrorist violence that erupts in South India in the wake of Quit India Movement, in violation of Gandhian ideology of **Ahimsa**. The moderately forward South Indian middle class family of Kitsamy, an I.C.S. Officer, and his sister Mira, faces a grave crisis when their distant relation and adopted brother Govind joins the Independence Party and indulges in terrorist activities. Govind hates Englishmen whom he considers unwanted imperialist rulers in his country. He incites violence and burning of the

gazette offices. He has also a great aversion for English Christian Missionaries who not only assault his religion but also set up their alien and unwanted institutions to aid and perpetuate the British rule in India. He and his revolutionary associates set the Mission School on fire in a bid to kill Christian Missionary Hickey. Hickey escapes but Kitsamy's wife Premala for whom Govind has great affection and regard and who is closely associated with the school, dies in the fire. When roused to deep anguish and wrath Kit accuses Govind's revolutionary associates for the heinous crime, a knife thrown at him from among the crowd hits him and kills him. Thus Govind's violent activities bring about the tragedy in the life of his own dear ones. His brother and sister-in-law are killed and sister Mira is separated for ever from her English lover, Richard Marlowe, a fellow officer and friend of Kit. The author's indictment of violence is conveyed through the enlightened journalist and social worker Roshan, who tells Govind :

“Everybody is interested in freedom ... only we do not all agree on the means to the end as I think you know too ... There is no power in violence ... only destruction ... I am not really interested in destruction.”<sup>5</sup>

Khushwant Singh's **I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale** depicts the divided life and tensions of the members of well-to-do families in the Punjab during the crucial period of the Second World War and “Quit India” Movement. The Indian political scene presents an anomalous situation during this period for while the young men turn desperate and resort to activities of violence as sabotage to free their country from the alien rule, the elder members of their families in the government service show unserving loyalty to their British masters and raise war funds to get glamorous titles as a reward for their loyal service. On the one hand Buta Singh, the Senior Magistrate, is imposing his efforts to please Mr. Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner, and serve the cause of the British Government in India, on the other hand his son Sher Singh is involved in the activities of a terrorist group of students.

The novel describes how when the Indian leaders are arrested soon after the Indian National Congress passes “Quit India” resolution, there take place strikes and demonstrations all over the country. Young men and women indulge in acts of violence and sabotage. The Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, an organization of revolutionaries, distributes cyclostyled circular in English with the caption, “A manifesto of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army”, drawing attention to the arrests of the leaders and asking the youth of India to arise and rid themselves of foreign rule. Without mincing words it says :

“Shoot English officials and the Indian toadies who serve them. Destroy roads and bridges; cut telegraph and telephone wires; create chaos and paralyse the administration. This is your sacred duty. Long live the revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

Sher Singh and his friends join this organization and take the oath in the name of Bhagat Singh and other martyrs to liberate their country from foreign rule. As their first measure in this direction, they plan to blow up a railway bridge. They kill Jhimma Singh, the village headman, who comes to know of their intention and informs the police about it. Sher Singh is implicated in the crime and put in the police custody. There is a touch of irony in Khushwant Singh's delineation of the young revolutionaries of the “Quit India” Movement. He finds them lacking in the real mettle of the authentic freedom fighters. Even Sher Singh's bluster and self-confidence withers “in the icy cold atmosphere of the police station.”<sup>7</sup> He, however, tries to show his earlier spirit of bravado when on being released through the good offices of the Deputy Commissioner, he is taken round the city in an impressive procession of students. He thumps his garland laden chest and boasts that though the British officers inflicted inhuman cruelties on him, “they could never break the spirit of this son of India and God willing they never will.”<sup>8</sup>

Aamir Ali's **Conflict** portrays events of the “Quit India” movement as they occurred in Bombay and its villages. The students of Bombay University who attend the session of all India Congress Committee held in Bombay on August 7, 1942, feel jubilant over the historic speeches of the great national leaders. The Committee passes the historic “Quit India Resolution” on 8 August. On 9 August, the students invite Jawaharlal Nehru to address them in the University campus but learn of his and other leaders arrest by the British Government. Enraged by the arrest of their leaders, students and other citizens hold protest meetings and take out processions shouting slogans, “Britishers, Quit India.” “**Shuroo** howa hai Gandhi **raj!**” “Down, down the Union Jack!”, “Up, up the National Flag!” Policemen and military soldiers are called by the government in large number to suppress the mass upsurge:

It was exciting thing to be just walking through the city. Everywhere the people were up and in arms. There was an atmosphere of revolution all over the city from the main roads to the humblest alley. Trains and buses stood deserted at various points all over the city and cars were an occasional rarity. Police paraded and

charged everywhere. Sometimes there was retaliation by the people with soda-water bottles, stones and such like missiles... But these were more useful for breaking glass and electric bulbs in the street lights than for anything else.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after student leaders are rounded up and sent to jail.

Left alone, Shanker, the hero in the novel, goes back to his village to organise the movement there. Villagers respond to his call and in large number join him in the revolt against the government. They set fire to the official files in the house of the village mamalatdar and force him to resign from the government service.

Shanker feels elated when his betrothed Shanti with National flag in her hands, leads the procession of agitating peasants:

There was something wonderful in that. The real people of India, the real life of India. Shanker saw that against the background of centuries and centuries, holding fast together; indestructible. And he felt proud to belong to such a people so proud that it was like a pain inside him.<sup>10</sup>

As the policemen and soldiers enter the village to suppress the agitation, Shanker absconds from there. When he returns from his hide-out, he is grieved and shocked to see the corpse of his beloved Shanti floating in the river. Later describing the woeful tale of the savage atrocities of soldiers in the village, his mother tells him:

“Then at night, the soldiers began to shout and make a great noise. They must have been drunk. They went mad Absolutely mad like dogs and animals. And they began to enter the houses and drag the girls and the women. People tried to stop them; they used sticks to hit people on their head if they tried to prevent them. And they went into the houses and — and — they shamed the women. They caught the women and the children. Young girls. Oh, they were brutes. They were not human...”<sup>11</sup>

Indian English Novelists thus portrays the Quit India Movement in all its details from its genesis to its full fury. Indian English Novelists have given such a comprehensive and vivid account of the national upsurge, political fervour, Indian people’s dauntless courage in facing the mighty alien power and the brutal retaliation

and repression that followed in the wake of the Movement.

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