

Gandhian Ideology and Socio-Political Transformation in Pre-Independence India: R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*

¹Sharma Vandana & ^{*2}Rani Sunita

¹Asstt. Prof. in Communication Skills, Bhai Gurdas Institute of Engg. & Tech., Sangrur, Punjab (India)

²Asstt. Prof. in English, COEM, Punjabi University Neighbourhood Campus, Rampura Phul, Bathinda, Punjab (India)

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*Corresponding Author

Email: sunita.23cs[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, renders a true and complete picture of pre Independence times. The novelist's major concern is with the common people of South India and how they reacted to the nationalist movement led by Gandhiji. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the proliferation of the Gandhian ideology in the deep interiors of South India is presented through trivial incidents that happen to the common citizens. The novel deals with the political conditions that existed in India between 1941 and 1948. Activities of the Indian people following Gandhiji's declaration of Quit India Movement are quite prominently mentioned. This paper attempts to study the impact of Gandhian Ideology on India's struggle for freedom in Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The nationalist movement is seen entirely in terms of small events and particular situations.

Introduction

Waiting for the Mahatma, first published in 1955 by Methuen, London, does not fall in the mainstream of R. K. Narayan's novels. It has a distinctive setting and theme, and is often regarded as a Gandhian novel. Uma Parameswaran remarks: "It is a Gandhian novel. Technically, Sriram is the hero of the novel and the plot revolves round him: but the predominant figure, even though he is seldom on the stage, is Gandhi and the theme is Gandhism" (65). However, Narasimhaiah thought Narayan had "made a muddle" of "the Gandhian principle" (155). This view is echoed by Kaul when he says. "Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* are incomparably superior 'Gandhi-Novels'" (*Indian Literature* 227). Walsh, however, reckons it among Narayan's triumphs. Walsh Comments in *R.K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*:

Narayan is not, one must interpose, a political novelist in the way that, for example Mulk Raj Anand is, neither is *Waiting for the Mahatma* a political novel in the way that *Coolie* or *Untouchable* is...Narayan's work contains no scalded sense of social injustice, no artificial anguish, no colonial indignation, and yet Narayan is clearly as Indian as any other Indian writer. (88)

Waiting for the Mahatma is not precisely a political novel although the backdrop has distinct national or political overtones. The theme of Gandhism as portrayed in the novel has a certain context. It is to be viewed in relation to Sriram, the hero of the novel who is weak, indecisive and incapable of understanding Gandhiji's message, but something in him responds to its grandeur. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes: "Thus to condemn *Waiting for the Mahatma* as an inadequate presentation of the Gandhian movement is to condemn it for not doing something Narayan never set out to do" (*The Twice Born Fiction* 43). In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the novelist has told the tale of Sriram's love for Bharati against the background of the freedom struggle led by Gandhiji. What becomes the theme of the novel is Sriram's involvement in politics that even

helps him to find consummation in his love. Shiv K. Gilra considers the theme of Gandhism "as more or less incidental" (*R.K. Narayan: His World and His Art* 42).

Waiting for the Mahatma is primarily a Malgudi novel with the Middle class life as its milieu. The novel bears the stamp of Narayan's art in its delineation of life—realism and humanism. "Common people with their common malice...are given animate and eloquent identity by Narayan" (Parameswaran, "Native Genius" 73-74). Part-I of the novel opens with an account of the early and idle life of Sriram. He lost his parents in infancy. His father, a soldier in the British Army, was killed in Mesopotamia in the First World War. He was one of those unlucky Indian Soldiers who were used by Britain as human fodder for the guns of the enemy. Sriram's mother "died delivering him" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 1). Since then he has been looked after by his old and orthodox granny.

Love at first sight is very common in Narayan's novels and so is the case with Sriram. He meets Bharati when one day she approaches him for the contribution to the fund which is being collected for the reception of Gandhiji in Malgudi. Bharati is the daughter a freedom fighter who lost his life during non-cooperation movement. She was adopted by the local Sevak-Sangh. Sriram decides to attend Gandhiji's lecture in the hope that he will meet that girl Bharati again. The entire Malgudi is ready to receive Gandhiji. A huge gathering sitting on the sands or Sarayu, awaits the arrival of their beloved leader. Malgudi has positively woken up to catch the political tempo of the country. This prompts Iyengar to comment: "*Waiting for the Mahatma* is an ambitious effort, an impressive feat; but one also feels that Narayan's art now denied the security of Malgudi and catapulted into Gandhian or terrorist political action—betrays unsureness and perplexity" (*Indian Writing in English*).

In *Waiting for the Mahatma* Gandhiji himself appears in person and addresses political meetings in Malgudi. Condemning violence the Mahatma goes to the extent of

saying: "Before you aspire to drive the British from this country you must drive every vestige of violence from your system" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 77). The Independence movement in India under the leadership of Gandhiji was not merely a political struggle. On the social plane also a similar struggle for freedom was going on side by side with the political struggle. It was a determined fight against superstitions, caste-system and untouchability which have been sapping the very vitality of our society. Agnihotri remarks: "This novel [*Waiting for the Mahatma*] unfolds before the reader a panoramic view of Gandhiji's personality, the life of Ashramites. Gandhiji's solicitude for the welfare of harijans..." (*Indian Life and Problems* 91).

In Malgudi, Gandhiji prefers to stay with the harijans rather than the gorgeous house of the Municipal Chairman, put up at a cost of two lakhs of rupees. On different occasions we find him in the company of children, harijans, villagers and his own volunteers. Sitting in the imposing building of Municipal Chairman, Gandhiji calls a sweeper boy and asks him to sit by his side on the divan, much to the distress and dismay of his host. Gandhiji also distributes the oranges specially got for him, among all the children. The picture of Mahatma that is drawn in the novel, does full justice to his concern for the common man. Driven by his love for Bharati, Sriram wants to join the Gandhian movement which certainly needs more and more workers, but Gandhiji insists on Sriram taking his granny's permission. Gandhiji says: "You have a grandmother. I hear, no parents... you must look after your granny too, she must have devoted herself to bringing you up" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 79). Thus even comparatively ordinary matters engage the Mahatma's attention. Gandhiji has caused a stir in some orthodox quarters of Malgudi. Granny gets worried when she learns from Kanni that Sriram is in Mahatma's camp. Granny has quite different views regarding Gandhiji. In the words of the novelist: "For her [Granny] the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with police" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 62).

Socially India has been since time immemorial bewitched by the division of society into castes and sub-castes. Sweeper class is the lowest in the hierarchy among the untouchables themselves. Their touch or even their presence is considered polluting. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the sweepers "who lived outside the town limits" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 37), are real harijans who clamour for social and economic justice. Narayan realistically depicts the most dehumanized condition in which this sweeper class lives. The Part II of the novel takes Sriram into the vortex of the national activities. He accompanies Mahatmaji in his tour of poverty-stricken villages and acquires first-hand knowledge of the miserable condition of the poor peasants. The novelist gives a true picture of poor villagers who are suffering from the scarcity and hardships caused by the Second World War and are also the victims of the ruthlessness of the profiteers and hoarders. The departure of the Mahatma at the end of his tour leaves Sriram alone at a new home — "a deserted shrine on a slope of the Mempi Hill, overlooking the valley" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 94). Bharati is now his new Guru. Agnihotri remarks: "The impact of Gandhi transmitted through Bharati changes his

whole life bringing him out of the smug somnolence of pampered adolescence" (Agnihotri, *Indian Life and Problems* 100). Now Sriram had set duties to perform everyday—"Spin and read *Bhagavad Gita*, and utter Ram Nam continuously..." (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 96). Sriram felt proud on the day he got his Khadi clothes in exchange of yarn spun by him. It was a period of Gandhiji's popularity and his appeal to the masses in the form of respect shown to national goods and boycott of all foreign stuff. Being a true volunteer, Sriram burns all his mill manufactured clothes and declares, "I will never again wear clothes spun by machinery" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 99).

Waiting for the Mahatma deals with the political conditions that existed in India between 1941 and 1948. Activities of the Indian people following Gandhiji's declaration of Quit India Movement are quite prominently mentioned. In the words of the novelist:

The Mahatma had in 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'... After the 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. (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 102)

As a part of the movement, Sriram is given a new job. Bharati brings a can of paint and a brush for him to write 'Quit India' at various strategic places. The job brings him into contact and confrontation with a variety of people with different notions of patriotism, nationalism and swaraj. In this context Sundram rightly remarks:

Narayan is not concerned with the impact Gandhi made on the millions of India, but rather with how one individual — the very ordinary mentally and morally with no pretense to any idealism — reacted to this great man. Also, in how many different ways the coming of Gandhi affected ordinary men and women in India. (*R.K. Narayan* 84)

Sriram's first encounter is with innocent villagers who do not know the meaning of 'Quit India'. A village teacher asserts, "I am as much a patriot as you, but honestly do you think we are ready to rule ourselves" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 104). Then there is a timber contractor with a neutral stance, giving five thousand rupees to Gandhiji's Harijan fund and an equal amount to the Government's War Fund. Sriram's most interesting encounter, however, is with Mathieson an Englishman. He says to Sriram: "Well, I was your age when I came here and I am sixty-two today. You see, it is just possible I am as much attached to this country as you are" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 114). Mathieson also offers Sriram a glass of orange juice. It is followed by a hilarious situation in which Sriram gets involved with a small shopkeeper who has thoughtlessly told him that he has the best English biscuits—all imported. Sriram is an active votary of the Mahatma and he pickets the shop single handed and tells the shopkeeper: "If you have any pride as an Indian, you will throw the entire stock

in the gutter and won't let even a crow peck at it" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 117). When a lady comes to buy something from this shop, Sriram falls flat before the shop declaring, "you can walk over me if you like, but I will not allow you to buy anything in this shop" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 119). No one takes Sriram seriously. Sriram's faith staggers when he finds the people more interested in the official meetings than in the call of the esteemed leader for the freedom of the country. He is suddenly seized with a sense of exhaustion and futility of it all. Sriram becomes so desperate that he withdraws himself completely from the movement. Bharati and other Congress leaders are arrested. But Sriram decides to remain away from the public gaze.

In the Part III of the novel, we meet Jagdish who introduces himself as a national worker. In fact, he is a photographer turned into a terrorist. Jagdish has his own ways of fighting the British and he thinks that he is also a follower of Gandhiji in his own right. He was looking for a place where he would install a small radio set which could also transmit coded messages. In the absence of Bharati, Sriram, weak as ever allows himself to be used by Jagdish and in spite of all his limitations he stretches himself to the utmost. Sriram's slight deviation from the Gandhian path at the instance of Jagdish is significant to spotlight the 'Subash factor' so popular in Indian mind at that time and its sharp appeal to the young. Indian national movement was a combination of many different forces, working sometimes together in the same direction and sometimes in contrary directions. No doubt, Gandhian ideology was the prime-mover, but the leftist revolutionary parties were also working towards the same end but through different means.

Sriram joins his new friend in his terrorist activities and helps him first in noting down the messages and speeches of Subhas Bose from Tokyo and Berlin and circulating cyclostyled copies of them among the Indian soldiers and afterwards in over-turning and derailing trains, cutting telegraph wires, setting fire to the records in law courts, exploding crude bombs, and indulging in such other acts of violence. By this time Sriram has acquired enough importance. The police become alert and announce a suitable reward for his head. It seems that politics creeps in imperceptibly in Malgudi life. The Liberation movement and this politics though depicted on a reduced canvas, reveals Malgudi as a real microcosm of Indian society. Bharati informs Sriram of his dying granny when he goes to meet her in the prison. Returning home, Sriram learns of his granny's death. The episode of granny's funeral when she turns to be alive is full of realistic details of an orthodox society in India.

Narayan, here, gives the glimpse of the rigid religious conventions and social traditions prevalent in the society. It is considered disgraceful and immoral to break these conventions. Various kinds of superstitious beliefs are rampant among the masses. Biswal remarks: "Though Malgudi yields to the changes of time on the surface, at heart its people are still bound to traditional beliefs and values" (*A Critical Study of the Novels of R.K. Narayan* 21). The police was looking for Sriram for a long time. The arrival of Sriram on his granny's funeral is a good opportunity for the police. Sriram is arrested and is sent

to jail. Part IV of the novel, gives a glance into the prison life of Sriram. The Fund Office manager visits Sriram in jail. He informs him that granny, respecting the Hindu tradition, has gone to Benaras, cheerfully to await death on the sacred Ganga Ghats there. This short part concludes with Sriram getting out of the jail after Independence. He is now a free man in free India.

The last part of the novel opens with Sriram filled with a sense of vacuity. His own home in Kabir Street was occupied by strangers and "Kanni's shop was gone" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 224). Sriram is extremely sorry to notice the designs of Jagdish to cash on his services rendered to the nation. It's from Jagdish that Sriram hears of communal riots at different places in India in the wake of India's partition into Bharat and Pakistan. Jagdish explains: "Whole villages have been burnt in inter-communal fights. Thousands of people have been killed, bereaved, dispossessed, demented, crushed" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 230). These communal riots show an ugly face of the reality that India had to face after Independence. It was one of the crucial phases in the entire Indian history. What one community did in one part of the country brought suffering on the same community in another part of the country. Sriram also learns from his friend Jagdish a lot about Bharati who was thousands of miles away at Noakhali, tending the victims of the communal riots. Sriram writes a letter to Bharati. She, in reply, asks him to come to Delhi on or after 14th of January. Sriram goes to meet Bharati in Delhi where she is staying with Gandhiji in Birla Bhavan. The proximity of Bharati gives him a sense of homeliness.

In the person of Bharati we meet an ideal Indian girl who is strong in heart and character. Her reservations are sacred and in keeping with the Indian tradition of womanhood. The vast country, India is her First love. Coming out of jail, she goes with Bapu to those parts of the country where communal feelings and flames were causing unheard of violence. Being a true follower of Gandhian principles, she sacrifices her personal desires for the sake of the ailing humanity. No doubt, she loves Sriram deeply. When Sriram is annoyed with her for not taking permission of Gandhiji, she wisely makes him realise the gravity of the situation. Bharati explains: "On the 15th of August when the whole country was jubilant, and gathered here to take part in the Independence Day festivities, do you know where Bapu was? In Calcutta where fresh riots had started" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 243). Gandhiji's journey to Noakhali, Calcutta in the wake of India's partition and the consequent sufferings due to communal riots finds cursory mention in this novel. Bharati appeared to be on the point of breaking down at the thought of suffering inflicted upon women. The following words of Bharati throw ample light on the condition of women in the riots:

So many of them [women] have been ruined, so many of them have lost their honour, their home, their children, and the number of women who are missing cannot be counted. They have been abducted, carried away by ruffians, ravished or killed, or perhaps have even destroyed themselves. (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 243)

When Sriram asked whether being a woman she was not endangering herself by travelling to those riot-affected areas. Bharati replied boldly, "there was no sense of fear where Mahatmaji was" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 245). She was even prepared to end her life if any unexpected thing happened. Sriram is horrified at this reply but Bharati plainly says: "It seemed quite natural thing to do in those places, where one saw burning homes, children orphaned, men killed, and women carried away. I felt we were in some other country" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 245). The structure of the novel smacks of Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, love and freedom. Gupta rightly remarks:

Not that through Sriram's story Gandhiji is ignored. Appearing though not chronological or too frequently, he is yet very much there and fairly well does Narayan describe the 'Quit India' movement and the Gandhi gatherings and the various ways in which Gandhi impresses various people. And he figures here not as an idea or a myth or a symbol as he does in some writers but as a sympathetic benevolent human being. ("The Gandhi in Narayan" 53)

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, we hear how Gandhiji walked through villages barefoot on his mission and spoke to those who had lost their homes, property, wives and children. There were a few places where people showed their anger even against Gandhiji but nothing could stop Gandhiji. In such places he even stayed longer. Gandhiji's influence on the masses can be felt in the following passage. Bharati explains to Sriram: "I have seen with my own eyes aggressive rowdy-looking men taking a vow of non-violence and a vow to protect the opposite faction" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 244).

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the stress is not merely on Gandhiji's influence but also on Gandhiji's himself. Iyengar comments: "We see him [Gandhiji] in Malgudi stationed in Nallappa's Grove and we see him, years later, in Delhi on his way to prayer on the fatal day, 30 January 1948" (*Indian Writing in English* 373). The long wait of Sriram is over when before going to the prayer ground, Gandhiji showers his blessings on both Sriram and Bharati. Gandhiji lovingly says: "God bless you... I will be your priest, if you don't mind. I have been a very neglectful father: I will come and present the bride" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 253). Then it is followed by a premonition. Gandhiji says: "Bharati, I have a feeling that I may not attend your wedding tomorrow morning... Anyway you are not to put off your marriage for any reason, remember" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 253). After a brief talk with Mahatmaji, Sriram and Bharati accompany him to the prayer ground in Birla Bhavan and witness the ghastly scene of Gandhiji's murder by a misguided youth.

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the novelist explores the Gandhian ideology of love, freedom and non-violence. Sharan aptly remarks in *A Critical Study of the Novels of R K. Narayan*: "The inter-personal relations of Sriram and Bharati reflect the Mahatma's thought-pattern. Gradually, the personal needs are dissolved into national and the ego becomes identical with the sublime" (185). Sriram makes a clear confession of his violent activities to Gandhiji. He successfully tames his violent sex

passions and learns to discriminate between passion and love. "It is Bharati who makes a patriot and a man of Sriram" (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 373). She is an embodiment of Gandhian ideals. She has developed this pious spirit under the enlightened guidance of Gandhiji.

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan adopts the technique of other Malgudi novels. The novelist focuses on the contemporary incidents and makes the reader look at these incidents through the narrow viewpoint of Sriram who is an immature romantic youth. He does not understand the importance of Gandhiji and his philosophy but joins Gandhiji's entourage only for the sake of Bharati. Thus *Waiting for the Mahatma* traces the growth of this individual from ordinary simple guy to a mature man who gradually not only learns Gandhian philosophy but also tries to adopt these principles in his life. *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a novel about an individual's growth and maturity. There is obviously no discussion of political ideas of Gandhiji in this novel. Naik aptly remarks: "Though political ideas are not discussed in it, ironic comments on the reception of the Gandhian ideology are interspersed throughout the narrative" (*The Ironic Vision* 38).

No doubt, Sriram deviates from the path of non-violence shown by Gandhiji, and indulges in the terrorist activities in the company of his revolutionary friend. His acceptance of his mistake and his marriage with Bharati shows the triumph of non-violence over violence. This is the inner message of the novel. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the proliferation of the Gandhian ideal in the deep interiors of South India is presented through trivial incidents that happen to Sriram. The nationalist movement is seen entirely in terms of small events and particular situations. The apathy of the village people is seen through the incident of Sriram's picketing of a shop where foreign biscuits are sold. In another incident, the innocent villagers are unable to judge the difference if British leave the country. They simply ask: "what will happen, Sir, if they leave? Who will rule the country?" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 103). A school teacher advises Sriram to write "Quiet India" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 104), instead of "Quit India." Since Sriram's orbit of operations lay in "the mountain villages scattered here and there" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 106), he went into a part of the jungle where elephants were hauling timber. Sriram penetrated here with his own message. He advises the mahouts: "Don't supply these materials for the war, it will take centuries for us to grow all this timber again. Refuse to do this job: it's in your hands. Don't strengthen the hand that is opposing you" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 107). The timber-contractor, who was observing him, came up and pleaded: "Please leave us alone. We don't wish to get into all this bother... Please don't disturb our labour please" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 108). Like a true businessman, the contractor knows how to please government officials. He also pretends to be a follower of Mahatmaji. The timber-contractor says: "Ah, Mahatmaji, I gave five thousand rupees to the Harijan Fund, I have a portrait of him in my house, the first face I see is his, as soon as I get up from bed" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 108). Sriram felt depressed at the sight of this rich man. He got up abruptly saying, "If you have a photo of Mahatma Gandhi, pray that he may inspire you with reasonable thinking" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 109).

Sriram works hard to strengthen the Gandhian movement in Malgudi and the nearby villages. He propagates the message of Mahatma among the rural folk. Wherever he went he wrote 'Quit India.' But it was followed by loyalists amending 'Quit India' with: 'Don't' or an 'I' before 'Quit' (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 109). Sriram encounters people with different notions. In one place a man asked Sriram: "What is the use of your writing 'Quit India' in all these places? Do you want us to quit?" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 109). For him it is only a waste of time and paint. To Sriram, all this seemed suddenly pointless, seeing the kind of people for whom it was intended. Sriram thinks: "They don't seem to deserve anything we may do for them. They sell and eat foreign biscuits. They are all frivolous-minded... They will thank us for leaving them alone, rather than for telling them how to win Swaraj" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 126).

Conclusion

Thus, in *Waiting for the Mahatma* the novelist's major concern is with the common people of South India and how they reacted to the rationalist movement led by Gandhiji. In this context Gupta comments: "We find that almost all the characters that appear in the novel are involved in and react to Gandhi. It doesn't matter if such involvement or reaction is

reverential and favourable or it just shows disapproval or anger, but involvement is there" (Gupta, "The Gandhi in Narayan" 51). Narayan, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, renders a true and complete picture of pre-Independence times. He presents in his novel a cross-section of varied humanity which may be found anywhere. Gupta observes:

There is authentic portrayal of events inspired by the Mahatma—events like the picketing of foreign goods shops, little girls collecting money for the Harijan Fund and the Harijan entering Vaishnav temples, people catching messages from Subhash Bose's I.N.A., the police brutalities, the filling of goals, and also Gandhi's prayer meeting scene in which Gandhiji claps his hands and wants everyone to keep time and join him in chanting RaghupatiRaghavRajaram. (Gupta, "The Gandhi in Narayan" 50-51)

The political life of the country can be studied through the characters of Sriram, Bharati and Jagdish. Gandhiji's going to Malgudi is a great event. The people living in the dark receive the superb message of truth and non-violence. India is freed from the British rule, but the people of India lose the great leader.

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