

R.K.NARAYAN'S 'WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA': AN ENTOURAGE TO GANDHI

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Abstract

R.K.Narayan's Waiting for Mahatma is a tale of remarkable insight into the upsurge of Indian nationalism as witnessed through the eyes of Sriram and Bharati, and told with all the genius and compassion we have come to expect from R.K.Narayan. Sriram's evolution into manhood is a strange and bewildering process. Bharati, the girl he worships, is witty, infuriating, capable and wonder of wonders, condescending to the moonstruck Sriram. Her first loyalty, though, is to Mahatma, a saint blessed with disconcerting common sense. Sriram's tragedy is that he is so much greater than his followers. Most of them accept his ideas enthusiastically, and without realizing it, pervert them to suit their own coarser personalities. Sriram is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, but he is too easily influenced by glamorous patriots of the type of Jagdish, a terrorist

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R.K. Narayan, a prominent writer has presented the images of nation in his fictional world. There is an undercurrent of national accounts in his fictions. *Waiting for Mahatma*, a magnum opus of the writer depicts the freedom struggle from the clutch of foreign rulings. Sriram and Bharati are the creations of nation revolting for freedom. Sriram is the follower of the principles and policies of Mahatma. He is an ardent devotee of the Father of Nation. He inspires the people to follow the non-violence of Mahatma. Bharati collects funds in order to organise meetings to propagate the philosophy of Mahatma. She is the staunch supporter of the freedom strugglers of the nation. She is infused with national feelings and emotions. The clash of ideas and ideologies are the emerging themes in the subsequent phases of the fiction. Sriram is fascinated by the violence and agitation of Subash Chandra Bose. The peace and tranquility of Mahatma does not create an eternal impression in his mind. He is reluctant to imbibe the visions and conceptions of Mahatma. The conflict and turmoil between the national feelings are the major crux of the present paper. Sriram and Bharati are the representative figures from the annals of history to revive and recollect the images of nation and nationality. They are two souls mingling with one for the common cause of the nation. The narrations of history, the creations of national figures and emerging growth of

nationalism are the clear dispositions of the paper. It is an attempt to examine the collusion of the ideologies of characters. The characters are perpetually struggling to dominate and emphasize the ideological base and foundations. There is an indepth analysis of national sentiments, historical revelations and social set-up in the pre independence era.

Published eight years after India attained independence and seven years after Gandhi's assassination in 1948, *Waiting for Mahatma* has generally been regarded as a political novel. In many ways, it is deserved to be viewed as such, not least because a credible version of historical Gandhi appears in the novel and many of the tenets of his philosophy and episodes of his career are sketched in. These include his 1930 Salt March to Dandi, his advocacy of ahimsa (non-violence) in the struggle for swaraj (home rule) his injunction to wear khaddar (homespun) produced on one's charaka (spinning wheel), the institution of QUIT India campaign in 1942, his opposition to partition, his fasting to try to combat the inter-communal violence that followed independence in East Bengal and finally his assassination. Yet, despite this, the fiction maintains a degree of distance from its political subject-matter. It dramatizes the Gandhi an ethical and hero Sriram's involvement in the freedom struggle.

The spatial dynamics of the text reflect the character's psychology and central to the meaning of the work. The enclosed world of Kabir Street and nearby Marker Road is contrasted with a number of other sites, which offer alternative to its imagined security. Here, though the canvas is broader and the reader who comes to *Waiting for Mahatma* realizes that the Gandhian challenge to caste exclusiveness is diametrically opposed to brahminical psycho-social imperatives. The fiction is no sense hagiography, but equally it is never critical of Gandhi and Sriram's involvement in the nationalist struggle foregrounds tensions in the fiction between a longing for conservative stability and a recognition, but also of its more positive aspects.

Before Gandhi arrives in Malgudi, the local dignitaries who form the Reception Committee appointed to take care of the arrangements. One possibility is town's Circuit House, a one time East India Company building, where Clive is reputed to have stayed on his way to relieve the siege of Trichinopoly. Although Malgudi's citizens take pride in this building and distinguished visitors are usually housed there, the Committee that its colonial provenance makes it inappropriate for Gandhi. From the outset the Municipal Chairman has assumed that Gandhi will stay in 'the biggest and best furnished house in Malgudi, Neel Bagh, his own palatial'(WM38).

Drawn into the movement as such by his attraction to a young woman, Bharati, Sriram soon finds himself in a hut with the Congress workers and different attitudes of life are conveyed through the contrast. Though Sriram is only a short distance from home, he is another Narayan protagonist who finds a tiny movement away from his familiar environment initiates him into 'an entirely new world'(WM72) Missing his room in Kabir Street, he nevertheless realizes that he is experiencing a complete reversal of values: 'There

was a class of society where luxuries gave one a status, and now here was the opposite. Here the currency was suffering and self-mortification'(WM73)In a novel such as *The English Teacher* the consequences of encountering the kind of polluted space that sweepers' huts represent are disastrous and even the more worldly Margayya finds the gutter in Vinayak Muduli Street threat to his luminal existence. Here, though, respect for the Gandhi an campaign against caste exclusiveness complicates the issue, again making it difficult to give much credence to the view that Narayan is representing an essentialist, unchanging India.

The regional specificity of his settings argues against this and virtually all the novels show their protagonists facing the change brought about modernity. However, *Waiting for Mahatma* goes further in that Gandhi's advent quickly transforms Sriram from a 'contemplative idler' into someone who actively espouses the new values. Orthodox values are personified by Sriram's grandmother who refuses to allow the scavenger who sweeps the Kabir Street.

Sriram has only rudimentary knowledge of Gandhi's social philosophy and when he is joined in the temple by the photographer, Jagdish, a follower of Gandhi's rival Subhas Chandra Bose, who opposed his non-violent policies. He is easily co-opted into more militant anti-British action, with the consequence that he becomes a wanted man. In addition to demonstrating his ignorance of competing views of Indian nationalism, this section of the novel finds Sriram alternating between feelings of 'romantic impulse' thinking he is 'a character out of an epic' whose action will determine 'future history' (WM168)

Tensions and ambivalence certainly inform Sriram's commitment to the nationalist struggle. His initiation into the movement by Bharati, who is more politically aware than he is, leads to a situation in which romance and political idealism intertwined in his mind. At first his involvement in the case seems to be inspired by motives that are far from political, but the dividing line between personal and political is a porous one. Challenged by Bharati as to the meaning of her name, Sriram responds, 'Bharat is India, Bharati is the daughter of India, I suppose'(WM59)The novel develops a set of analogies between its individual situations and public events, which lend themselves to interpretations as a national allegory of a kind that is rare in Narayan. In this context, the treatment of family, which dismantles the beliefs of orthodox Hinduism, is especially interesting. Like Sriram, Bharati is an orphan and when he proposes her, she repeatedly avoids answering him, insisting that they must wait for the Mahatma's blessings. Close to the end of the novel, they finally receive this and Gandhi tells them they already have a family of thirty children who have been orphaned by the communal violence following in the wake of partition. So the novel concludes with the possibility of the marriage of two children, at the behest of self-styled surrogate 'father' (WM253) will raise an extended family of orphaned children.

Earlier Sriram's involvement in more militant anti-British action, such as derailing train and exploding a crude bomb at agricultural research station, leads to his being arrested and detained without trial. There is a symmetry about his finding himself in prison, since he

has been previously been told that the self-imposed Gandhian austerity of living in sweepers' hut is a preparation for jail, a fate which those involved in the struggle must expect. The novel is part-Buildindsroman and Sriram's contact with lower-caste inmates blurs his sense of what constitutes humanness, as he becomes aware that he is 'running up against a new species of human being, speaking like monsters, but yet displaying sudden human qualities' (WM193)

Narayan emphasizes adjacency of seemingly autonomous world: the jail turns out to be just outside Malgudi's town limits, but despite this physical proximity it is as if Sriram has been another planet and where the novel is concerned. It means that seismic political changes that have occurred are rendered more obliquely. Narayan not only continues to keep macro politics at a distance, but also suggests the extent which nationalist discourse is manufactured. This comes across vividly in a scene where, on his return to Malgudi, Sriram re-encounters Jagdish. The photograph shows him an album of pictures of Malgudi's independence celebration and Sriram is struck by the extent to which an image of independent nation is mediated. When Jagdish speaks of himself as the 'chief architect of Independent India, the chief operator in ejecting the British, (WM226), mirroring a fantasy that Sriram has entertained at an earlier point in the novel, the satire foregrounds the partisan nature of historiography.

At the end of the novel, in an episode reminiscent of a journey Margayya has made to Madras in *The Financial Expert*, Sriram travels by train to New Delhi to rejoin Gandhi and his entourage. Although Malgudi's station provided the inspiration from which the whole of the fictional town grew, the train proves an interstitial site, a space where different cultures come in contact. No single language unifies the various India's travelling in its carriages, the lack of shared language makes him increasingly aware of his South Indianness: 'He spoke Tamil and English, and they understood Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu or whatever might be' (WM234). Consequently, he feels, 'more uncomfortable here than he had felt in the prison' (WM234) and, in the present scenes, difference is accentuated through another crucial marker of Indian regional identity, food. The train, The Grand Trunk Express, is as surely, the Grand Trunk Express, is as surely a trope for pan-Indian communication as Kipling's Great Trunk Road in *Kim*. It both functions as a space identity is in transit and as a location that affords a microcosm of India, foregrounding differences between its communities, regions and classes.

Finally, in Delhi on the days immediately before Gandhi's assassination, Sriram is once again left waiting for Mahatma, now in a colony of sweepers' hut. The most obvious significance of novel's title is to the situation of the crowds of Malgudi residents who flock to the Mahatma's meetings on the banks of Sarayu, but this not its only resonance. The romantic plot also depends on waiting for Mahatma and it is only several years after Sriram's first involvement with Gandhi and his followers that this waiting seems to be an end. Although a version of Historical Gandhi is a presence in the novel and so waiting for Mahatma is not an existential predicament, a kind of representational deferral. Sriram becomes involved with

Gandhi and the freedom struggle and yet main events leading up to Indian Independence are reported obliquely at second –or –third hand. The denouement appears to be moving towards a resolution of the romantic plot of the kind that concludes many western novels of manners, but when Gandhi who is to officiate as the priest of waiting of Sriram and Bharati is assassinated. This pattern is frustrated and novel concludes with an open ending which not only leaves the issue of whether the marriage will take place in abeyance, but also transgresses the conventions of both ‘social comedy’ and ‘Hindu fable’

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