



R.K. Narayan's "*Waiting for the Mahatma*": A Thematic Analysis.

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Abstract

Waiting for the Mahatma, by the great Indian author R.K. Narayan, was published in 1955. It is one of the great works of fiction by R.K. Narayan. The setting of this novel is that of the fictional town of "Malgudi" in South India, in which many of Narayan's fictional stories and fictional characters took place. The plot is set in that period when India was under British colonial rule. *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R.K. Narayan is multi-layered, unveiling the multiple themes and aspects of India under British colonial rule, making it a perfect twentieth-century Indian masterpiece, written against the colonial rule that had existed in India till 1947. While the British rulers executing their manifold missions of governing and exploiting India, R.K. Narayan has excellently presented a clear portrayal of the upsurge of nationalism in India, and its votaries including the great and venerated people like M.K. Gandhi, along with some common people like Sriram and Bharati. Sriram's expanding love for Bharati, and his recklessness, gave another turn to the storyline when he got himself associated with an extremist like Jagdish who was a sort of terrorist in the disguise of a true nationalist! This paper aims to delve deeper into the intricate plot of *Waiting for the Mahatma* and then bring out the major as well as minor themes of the novel. It also studies the significance of the Gandhian ideologies in attaining "Hind Swaraj".

Keywords: colonial, nationalism, Gandhian ideologies, twentieth-century Indian masterpiece, fictional, storyline, themes.

Introduction

R.K. Narayan was a prominent figure of the twentieth century. He was born on October 10, 1906, and he left for his heavenly abode in 2001, leaving behind him a legacy of great works. He wrote multiple novels including *Swami and Friends* and many more. He also wrote some excellent short stories as well, including *Malgudi Days* and many others. *Waiting for the Mahatma* is one such remarkable piece of work by R.K. Narayan, which is set in the fictional town of "Malgudi" in South India. The book is divided into five parts, each revealing different themes including the various movements and aspects of twentieth-century India under British colonial rule.

Themes in the novel:

● The painful memories

The novel opens with a painful memory of Sriram's parents. Sriram was an orphan whose mother died delivering him. Whereas, his father was killed in Mesopotamia. Sriram could see his mother only in a framed photograph. And, "of his father, at least, there were recurring reminders"! Sriram's granny used to receive a monthly military pension meant for Sriram every month. That brown, oblong envelope always came to Granny as her beloved and late son's memory, which would always leave her teary-eyed. She never intended to spend that money, instead she used to deposit that to the "Fund Office".

The author here has made a satire on the Mesopotamian campaign of the early twentieth century, where the British and Indian troops fought against the Ottoman Turks of Mesopotamia. It led to a great deal of casualties. The death of Sriram's mother was at least natural, whereas, his father faced a tragic death due to the bloody war of Mesopotamia, resulting in the lifelong suffering of Granny! Gorpad, who was one of the volunteers in Mahatma Gandhi's camp, also had to face the pain of his father's death. Gorpad's father was shot dead by the police in front of Gorpad himself which became an extremely painful memory for Gorpad!

● Caste and Orthodoxy

R.K. Narayan has aptly caught the conscience of the pre-independence Indian society and the manners of its people. Granny is the embodiment of the orthodoxy prevailing in pre-independence India. When Sriram turned twenty and transformed from that little urchin into a free young man, he developed in himself the desire to be a young prodigal, with lots of money in his pocket when he got hold of his passbook. The money clamoured in his pocket to be spent! Sriram purchased a canvas chair from an old man and presented the chair to his granny. Granny examined the canvas of the chair and started chiding Sriram for bringing into the house a leather chair. Granny was so adamant about her religious principles and vows, that she assumed that the chair was made from some cow-hide, therefore she couldn't pollute herself at any cost! One day while listening to Gandhiji speaking about untouchability during his visit to Malgudi, Sriram in his mind thought of Granny. He recalled how Granny would bully the "ragged scavenger" who used to come to their house to clean it. "Granny was so orthodox that she would not let the scavenger approach nearer than ten yards". She used to bully him because of his inferior caste. During Sriram's initial interactions with Bharati, the woman who belonged to the Sevak Sangh, he fell in love with her, but initially, he was quite dubious about the complexion of her skin! The one thing that Sriram was sure about was that, if Bharati were dark, Granny would never allow him to marry her! Instead, Granny wanted Sriram to marry the "Kumbum girl" from the very beginning, as per her desire.

R.K. Narayan's art of characterisation is worth commending! Apart from Granny, there was another such orthodox man, the aristocratic chairman who surrendered his house for Gandhiji during Gandhiji's visit to Malgudi. The chairman made many alterations to the house for Gandhiji. However, Gandhiji made the house a public place during his stay! During his stay at the chairman's house, Gandhiji made a poor little boy seated on his Divan. The snobbish and aristocratic chairman's blood boiled up! For he thought that the boy was full of gutters since he was untouchable. And the boy could've left a permanent stain on the Kashmir counterpane!

● Nationalism

Waiting for the Mahatma is set against the backdrop of Indian nationalism. The theme of nationalism is deeply ingrained throughout the novel. The spirit of nationalism was becoming the major guiding force in the country! It led to multiple nationalist movements and the detention of nationalists. People were

becoming more vocal and rebellious against the British colonial rule which was exploiting the land as well as the people of India. R.K. Narayan has provided to the readers, multiple glimpses of Indian nationalism through the novel.

Bharati's father died during the 1920 Movement! Those days were the first non-cooperation days and Bharati's father led the first batch of "*satyagrahis*" who were going to take down the Union Jack from the secretariat of Madras. The highly venerated Mahatmaji was travelling across villages, towns, and cities to gain a better and deeper understanding of the condition of people, especially the vulnerable groups of women, the poor, and children. The author has also made a mention of the *Dandi March* of 1930, by Mahatmaji in opposition against the Salt Tax and to get that repealed. The spirit of nationalism was guiding everybody in different ways! Disciples like Bharati and Gopad, who were extremely true to the Mahatma, were true nationalists and patriots. Bharati was a staunch believer and follower of the Gandhian ideologies of "Truth", "Discipline", and "Non-violence". Bharati would often say that "none except absolute truth-speakers are allowed to come into Mahatma's camp. People who come here must take an oath of absolute truth before going into Mahatma's presence". She would also talk about the discipline at Mahatmaji's camp. She went wherever her Bapuji asked her to go. She was ever-ready for every task assigned to her. Bharati even happily surrendered herself at the police station at the command of Mahatmaji, as he wrote to her when he was in prison since August of 1942! Mahatmaji in his famous resolution of 1942, said that "Britain must quit India "!

Next to Bharati, was Sriram, who turned into a nationalist driven by his love for Bharati, when he first saw her and found her as one of the true disciples of Mahatmaji. His love for Bharati took him towards the righteous path, when Sriram's desire to stay with Bharati led to his participation in the non-violent revolt for independence, under the guidance of Mahatmaji. He even deserted his granny! Sriram started a new life, he toured across villages and started living in a deserted shrine on the Mempi Hill. He burned his mill clothes after making *khadi* clothes for himself. Sriram was assigned the task of writing "Quit India" all over the walls of the villages. He preached about Mahatmaji and his mission. He even got into a quarrel with a shopkeeper who was selling English biscuits in Solur village! Sriram did so for the sake of the *Swadeshi* movement of Gandhiji. Sriram claimed that he was only fighting the evil in the shopkeeper. Any fight was non-violent as long as someone was trying to kill the evil in the person and not that person. While performing such tasks, Sriram would often feel exhausted, confused, and aimless in the absence of Bharati! For Bharati was the only guiding force in his life now! When Bharati went to prison, Sriram refused to do so for he was getting no assurance of living with Bharati in the jail.

In the absence of Bharati, a violent man named Jagdish, found Sriram's weakest nerve and he assured Sriram to tell him about the whereabouts of Bharati and arrange a meeting with her in the slaughterhouse where she was kept in prison! Sriram was tempted by those promises of Jagdish and aided him in carrying out his violent and malicious plans! Jagdish claimed that he was a true nationalist and assigned Sriram, the task of sharing the pamphlets carrying Subhash Chandra Bose's message for the Army soldiers of India who were serving the enemy government. It was a cyclostyled message, which stated that the Indians serving in the British Army should lay down their arms when the Indian National Army of Bose marches into Delhi! Sriram completed the task! Another task assigned to Sriram was that of overturning a train carrying metal chrome, which was destined to reach England. All of Sriram's endeavours were driven by his love for Bharati, therefore he accepted the second offer as Jagdish promised him to arrange a meeting with Bharati. Eventually, when Sriram went to visit his granny at the suggestion of Bharati, he was caught by the police at Malgudi and was sent to prison!

Gopad's nationalism was different from that of Sriram's! Gopad's only aim was to oust the Britishers from India! He was forever ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation. The true spirit of nationalism won and India got independence in the end!

- **"Quit India" versus "Quiet India"**

When the wave of nationalism was rising in India, there was ignorance as well! R.K. Narayan has provided a perfect juxtaposition of the revolutionaries versus the ignorants of India, during the period of freedom struggle. Sriram during his mission of preaching about Mahatmaji and his plans for the independence of India, was assigned the task of writing "Quit India" wherever he went. One such day when he was performing the assigned task, he taught some school children to sing "Quit India" in a chorus. The teacher of those children intervened and asked Sriram to stop teaching the children such seditious behaviour, for that behaviour could invite the police towards them!

The teacher further asked Sriram to put one "e" before "t" in the word "Quit"! He added that India needs a "Quiet India" programme rather than a "Quit India" programme. The bystanders standing there, also supported the teacher and said that "The master is right, why should we irritate the *sircar*?" Also when Sriram went to the forest and asked the timber-contractor to stop supplying material for the war, the timber-contractor tried to dismiss Sriram, for the contractor was more concerned about his business and acquiring wealth. If revolutionaries were toiling hard for independence, then there were such ignorants too!

● Love

The theme of love is wonderfully portrayed by R.K. Narayan in the novel. The sentiment of love in the novel is erotic in the case of Sriram. Whereas in the case of revolutionaries like Gandhiji, Bharati, and Gopad, their selfless love and patriotism towards the nation always overpowered their feelings of selfish love and selfish desires!

Gandhiji's love knew no bounds! For him, the whole nation was his family. He was extremely compassionate towards the *Harijans*, whom society would always ostracize. Sriram's journey of becoming a *Satyagrahi* was highly uncertain and often aimless, for Sriram was never prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation. Although he gave up all his luxuries, still he was never ready for major sacrifices for the nation! More than independence, Sriram was striving for his marriage with Bharati. His love for Bharati always overpowered his love for the nation.

● Gandhian ideology of "Swaraj"

R.K. Narayan has been highly successful in acquainting the readers, with a great deal of Gandhian ideologies and principles, at times by mentioning them directly and at times by alluding to them. Gandhiji was venerated as "Mahatma" for a reason. Along with being a great independence activist, he provided knowledge to the learned, strength to the poor, firmness of mind to the agitated minds, and guidance to the ignorants, and he was a huge epitome of love and wisdom!

The first principle of Gandhiji that the novel reflects is that of "*ahimsa*". Mahatmaji rejected all forms of violence. He compared all the citizens of India with the soldiers of a non-violent army. This reflects Gandhiji's principle of employing the "force of love" over the "force of arms" which Gandhiji himself mentioned in his book *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909. He mentioned in *Hind Swaraj* that "the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity". Mahatmaji gave a threefold mantra of chanting "*Ram Dhun*", spinning on the "*charkha*" and the practice of absolute truth and non-violence, which is mentioned by R.K. Narayan in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. R.K. Narayan has aptly portrayed the kind of "Hind Swaraj" or "Indian Home Rule", as imagined by Gandhiji in his book *Hind Swaraj*.

The author has portrayed Gandhiji exactly as he was. He has mentioned Gandhiji's principles exactly as they were. He has mentioned Gandhiji's idea of "swaraj" and the ways to attain it as they were mentioned by Gandhiji himself. Gandhiji asked the people of India to learn the art of "self-control" and to become economically as well as socially independent, for mere political independence was not enough for the country. He asked the people of India to reject the mill and industrial goods, the way he

asked the people of Malgudi to wear *khadi* clothes instead of the mill clothes in the novel. This was Gandhiji's "swadeshi" movement!

Conclusion

Although the novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a work of fiction, it has its basis in the reality of twentieth-century India under British Colonial rule. R.K. Narayan's art of characterisation and the structure of the plot, have made all the characters look lifelike and believable, and the incidents relatable. The novel is a political and social satire on India under the British Raj, where there is oppression and misery, struggle and torture, exploitation and poverty, rebellion and eventual independence of the nation in 1947!

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