

## Gandhian Impact and Ideology in R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*

R.K. Narayan's novels portray various types of people from the fictitious town, Malgudi. His *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) is a political novel set during the freedom struggle days. Though a neglected artistic endeavour, the novel is a masterpiece in every sense. An unusual feature of the novel is the participation of Gandhiji and Netaji as characters adding credibility to the narrative. It is a stunning representation of freedom struggle movement and its impact on the lives of numerous Indian people. The best aspect of this novel is the capture of the simplicity of India and its citizens. The ongoing freedom struggle which alters the lives of different people like Sriram makes one feel about the numerous citizens who were forced to abandon their families for their country. The novel has often been interpreted more as a tale of Sriram's love for Bhurati against the background of Gandhian struggle for freedom than an exploration of Gandhian ideology of love, non-violence and freedom against the background of Sriram's love for Bhurati. It is in fact a serious novel defining love as a composite of non-violence and freedom both in its individual and collective implications, affecting responses towards political ideologies. Although the gimmicks of Sriram underplay the serious significance of the Indian consciousness both towards individual and national upliftment in the struggle for freedom in a non-violent way. The essence of such emphasis is embedded in Gandhi's vision of life as a purposive action directed by, what Erik H. Erikson sums up as, the "spirit of identification with humanity as a whole, on the basis of love, dignity, personal responsibility and solidarity."

Following Freudian analysis, Gandhi himself believed that Man's behaviour and conduct was controlled by the existence of two forces – 'life instincts' and 'death instincts' and violence was derivative of 'death instincts.' The fulfillment of life, he held, can only be brought by the strengthening of 'life instincts.' Love and non-violence were the derivative of 'life instincts' and the only virtues to resolve the inherent contradiction in man to be both part of nature and separate from it, to be human. Love, for Gandhi was mutual affirmation and union of equals without having any nexus with power or domination. Whereas non-violence in its negative terms means not injuring any living being whether by body or mind and in its positive term means love and charity towards all human beings including ones enemy. According to him all internal or external evils have to be fought with the same means of love, fearlessness and suffering. Non-violence for him was a way of making a voluntary collective force. While non-violence is a kind of positive resistance, love is acceptance and surrender to achieve higher goals of life. Both of these can be tried in private and public life to the same effect of attaining the fullest freedom of the self since politics consists in the struggle for freedom. Any struggle for freedom may involve conflict but it can be turned into Satyagraha by using the medium of love alone to a position "when mind and body and speech were in proper coordination." Love for Gandhi enabled "the

significant here. One, that terrorism disassociates the revolutionary from the society. Secondly, the distinction thus gained gives one an exaggerated sense of importance about oneself and one's own role. Thirdly, the freedom thus derived proves to be uncreative and illusionary. Sriram undergoes all these stages of romantic distortion and deterioration of personality. Although he doesn't excuse himself for making himself unworthy of associating with Bharati in his present misdirection, he blames it on Bharati and wishes "that she had not been such an uncompromising zealot. Everything that she thought or said or expected was set in grooves and hard to practice" (200). He dreams of escape from the prison but gives it up for the fear of making himself more unworthy of Bharati. His sense of dignity as a non-violent freedom fighter returns and when he is offered release provided he gave an undertaking to police from time to time, he rejects the proposal.

Finally, when he is released from prison, on the independence of the country, the difficulty of getting rice and any pure food, the sugar racket and the general avarice of black marketers of various kinds frustrates him. And when he notices the designs of Jagdish to cash on his services to the nation he feels disappointed. Two more aspects of the truth of Gandhian ideology emerge before Sriram. One is the nobility of conduct. Secondly, violence is a psychology that renders one unfit to live in sanity in peaceful times. He had yet something more to learn from Bharati, who after her release from the jail, instead of meeting him first, left for Noakhali with Gandhi to restore peace in the region – that is private interests can wait before national concerns. And when he finally meets Bharati in Delhi after such a long separation, from an idle and indolent boy he had become a sensitive activist. With equipoise of a true lover and a revolutionary to realize that it was Bharati who gave his whole life a new meaning and a new dimension. He had also become bold enough to confess to Gandhi of his misdirected violent activities and offer to go on fast as penance for purification. The very structural design of the novel is based on the exploration of the Gandhian ideology of love, non-violence and freedom as unity against the background of Sriram's love for Bharati. The nearer Sriram goes to Bharati, the more he learns about Gandhi. Her character can only be interpreted in terms of Gandhian philosophy of life and the role of the individual in the making of a nation. Narayan concretizes the image of Gandhi and the validity of his ideals both at the personal and national level against the background of Sriram's love for Bharati. The image of Gandhi and Gandhian philosophy interacts with the interpersonal attractions of Sriram and Bharati and gradually submerges the personal with sublimity. By the time Sriram comes to marry Bharati he undergoes sufficient orientation of mind and personality to understand and discriminate between passion and love, violence and non-violence and possession and freedom.

Gandhi does not discriminate between the crowd and the individual. He holds that collective violence is the product of the primary passion and violence, contaminating the individual and the way to ordered collective conduct lies in the emancipation of the individual conduct through discipline of passions in devotion to larger national concerns and nobler human truths. The novel reflects individual conduct in relation to the larger issues of human and national significance. Sriram's personal life gathers its relevance following the various stages of the political upheavals from Dandi March, Quit India Movement, partition

nature to persist" and non-violence the only reflex of love. Passion, he believed, was the antithesis to love and therefore constituted the perishable and the uncreative violence, which could only be overcome by a prolonged voluntary suffering, penance and training. In *Harijan*, Gandhi wrote "if the method of violence takes plenty of training, the method of non-violence takes much more training." Sriram therefore needed a prolonged training in understanding and realizing the meaning of love and the wider implications of non-violence in the context of freedom. He is a graduate living with his grandmother in Malgudi. Two things ignite his interest in life- The pretty girl, Bharati, who collected the contribution and the news of the visit of Gandhi to Malgudi. Bharati made him aware of beauty and Gandhi, of truth. Beauty had enamored him and truth had astounded him. When he tried to meet Gandhi in the camp he had to undergo a trial waiting, hunger, patience and order. He himself felt, "If one were to live in this camp one had to follow the orders that emanated from the great soul." (73) In the camp, Gandhi tells him-

*Before you aspire to drive the British from this country, you must drive every vestige of violence from your system. Until you are sure you have an overpowering love at heart for your enemy, don't think of driving him out. You must gradually forget the term "enemy". You must think of him as a friend who must love you. You must train yourself to become a hundred per cent ahimsa soldier. (77)*

The apprenticeship under Gandhi had brought about a new awareness in Sriram towards himself and his countrymen. He was full of desire to do something for his country. Mahatmaji had blessed his idea of self-development. He had developed a new confidence and was now moving from village to village spreading resistance against the British Raj in the country. It is during this time that he discovers some more realities of Indian life and character. He notices that the timber-merchants who had rejected his protestations not to supply timber for use by the British to run the war had donated funds both for the Harijan Fund and the War Fund. He sees the insensitivity and indifference people show towards his advice of not holding the Loyalists' Meeting or to sell or buy the foreign goods. Sriram writes to Gandhi about his frustrations but imagines Gandhi's reply to be: "your work should be a matter of inner faith. It cannot depend upon what you see or understand. Your conscience should be your guide in every action, consult it and you won't go wrong. You should do your duty because your inner voice drives you to do so." (127) It is only under such moments of extreme boredom due to loss of faith in action that his thoughts turn towards Bharati and her presence makes him pounce upon her in all his passion to possess her. Bharati restrains him from doing so till they receive permission from Gandhi to marry each other and all that he receives from Gandhi is the message of going to jail. In pursuance of Gandhi's wishes, Bharati courts arrest. Sriram keeps himself out of it and falls prey to the machinations of a revolutionary terrorist, Jagdish. Temporarily, Sriram finds his job of setting fire to the records in law courts, derailing trains, paralyzing the work in schools and exploding a crude bomb, exciting. When Sriram goes to meet imprisoned Bharati in disguise, she refuses to meet him on the grounds that Bapu has always said that it is dishonorable to assume subterfuges. Three things in regard to revolutionary terrorism become

of the country, violence in East Bengal to the post independence scene affecting the growth of his consciousness as part of the nation . Though a neglected novel of political awakening no other Indian novel in English is as political in intent as *Waiting for the Mahatma* in which the personal becomes the national in such a perfectly non- ideological way.