

## 'Gandhian Heroes' as portrayed in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and R.K. Narayana's *Waiting for the Mahatma*: An Appraisal

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### ABSTRACT

The nation-wide struggle for Independence was launched in 1857 and the person under whose leadership the country attained independence was born 12 years later i.e. in 1869. The leader was none other than Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Nation. After his matriculation in 1887, he was sent to England for higher studies. Having qualified for the Bar, he started his legal practice. His professional duty took him to Natal in South Africa, where he found his countrymen suffering under cruel laws. He experimented with the new weapons of truth, non-violence, love, faith in religion and passive resistance and successfully led protest movements. On returning to India, Gandhi found that the partition of Bengal, the 'Swadeshi' Movement of boycotting English goods, formation of the Muslim League and the Morely - Minto Reforms had surcharged the atmosphere with violence, hatred and suspicion. Political movement gave rise to militant nationalism. World War - I ended but the national hopes remained rather unfulfilled. The Montague - chelms ford Reforms, Rowlatt Act and Jalianwal Bagh Massacre generated more bitterness, agony and discontent. Bal Gangadhar Tilak had passed away and the responsibility of 'Swaraj' fell on Gandhiji's shoulders.

**Key words :** Gandhian Heroes

The uniqueness of Gandhian thought lies in the fact that it derives from an interaction between his ideas and actions. His ideas initiated mass action of a kind that spanned the whole of India across regional and linguistic boundaries. The three major movements namely Non-cooperation Movement in 1921, Salt Satyagraha in 1931 and the Quite India Movement in 1942 created such an upsurge as had never occurred before in Modern India. The sole objective of Gandhi's mass movement was to arouse an all - India consciousness, the first requisite being the growth of national

identity. It is this aspect of Gandhian an thought that had an immediate appeal for the Indian novelists in English. Gandhi thought addressed itself to certain issues of all - Indian relevance and this inspired the Indian novelists in English to choose English as the medium of their expression.

No doubt, by practising preaching and practising the ideals of youth, non-violence, fearlessness, simplicity, equality, honesty, love for all and hatred for none, religious toleration and self - realization through self - restraint and self abnegation, hatred for

untouchability, economic suppression and deep - rooted prejudices and superstitions', Gandhi revolutionized the social milieu by transforming the Indian scene, especially the women's status in Indian society. To a writer, especially to the writer of novels, the healthy and unbiased attitude of Gandhi had a great significance. Inevitably, in a variety of ways and in a small or large measure, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao the novelists in English were influenced by Gandhian thought and mass action. Inspired by the spirit of patriotism, the novelist of the time have not only justified the cause for India's struggle for freedom but also tried to draw the attention of the enlightened West. Gandhiji's ideology, the charisma of his personality and his love for mankind are proudly and prominently projected by practically all the novelists writing for this cause, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao being prominent among them.

Belonging to South India, both novelists, when compared with other writers, do significantly exhibit the ideology of Gandhiji through their novels *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *Kanthapura* respectively, in a calm and sensitive way with the background of the village atmosphere of South India. Both the novels deal with a similar theme: the impact of Gandhian thought on the average Indian. In the former, the plot is laid in Malgudi and in the latter, the plot is laid in Kanthapura. Both the novelists deal with the impact of Gandhian thought on non-violence, tolerance,

religion, untouchability, status of Indian women, prohibition and educational system, doing their level best to picture the pattern of the village society during the period from 1938, to 1948. Raja Rao wrote *Kanthapura* in 1938, when India was under the yoke of the British rule, In 1955, about seven years after Gandhi's assassination and after India's Independence in 1947, R.K.Narayan published the novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*.

The portrayal of Gandhi during the peak period of India's struggle for freedom, in the novels *Kanthapuram* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* merits a comparative analysis in terms of the portrayal of heroes in the two novels attesting to the fact that the heroes in both the novels have different views of Gandhian principles and his approach to social reforms. Gandhi had no intention to evolve and formulate any formal system or philosophy. Nor did he want to leave any 'ism' behind. Moreover, he believed in practising what he preached. He himself said: "he who would go in for novel experiments must begin with himself. That leads to a quicker discovery of truth and God always protects the honest experimenter"(SME PP 230-31).

Gandhi was a man of the masses. He realized that being educated and poor, the average Indian was being exploited, neglected and discriminated against in all walks of life. Gandhi identified himself with the man in the

street by adopting a simple dress and still a simpler style of living. He earned their unanswring loyalty for his sincerity, integrity, selflessness and" my passion for self - help and simplicity" (P 160). By giving a new perspective to national freedom, he wanted his countrymen to be free not only from the foreign yoke but also from fear, cowardice, ignorance, inertia, ill-will and intolerance. His religion advocated truth, love and 'ahimsa' which he felt should govern not only a man's personal but also public life. He preached that there should truth in thought, in speech and in action. He was a lover and follower of Jesus and Mohammed because they are' symbols of Truth'. Gandhi honestly opens his mind about Jesus and Mohammed on Truth as:

"Truth is the first thing to be sought for and beauty and goodness will then be added unto you. Jesus was, to my mind, a supreme artist because he saw and expressed truth; and so was Mohammed ... (WJM 5)

No doubt, it is Gandhiji's greatness that produced hundreds and thousands of little Gandhis throughout the country. This type of little Gandhis got projected and introduced by the novelist Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan in their novels *Kanthapura* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* respectively. In a study of *Kanthapura*, C.D.Narasimhaiah has discussed in detail the three strands of experience of Gandhi namely political, religious and

spiritual that stimulate the action in the novel *Kanthapura*. According to him, Moorthy, the hero of the novel *Kanthapura* represents "the convergence of these three strands." Moorthy is an educated youngman of Kanthapura. It seems that the impact of Gandhiji's personality has transformed him from a common village lad into a young man capable of leadership and the self- sacrifice and devotion which leadership entails.

In those days, hundreds and thousands of young men throughout the country gave up their studies and courted arrest and Moorthy is one of them. But the manner in which Moorthy walked out of college is unique. He is said to have had, not an actual, first - hand experience of Gandhi by personal contact but a vision of Gandhi addressing a public meeting and he himself pushing his way through the crowd and joining the band of Volunteers and receiving inspiration by a touch of Gandhi's hand. And that very evening Moorthy goes out alone and walks out of the college for good. It is he who organises the work of Congress in the village Kanthapura and hence he is the central figure in the novel. Thematically and technically, Raja Rao has pitched the whole of Kanthapura against the evil symbolised by the British rule in India. And this battle is fought under the leadership of Moorthy who one may call a local Gandhi. Moorthy, a Brahmin boy, who "had gone through life like a noble cow, quiet, generous serene, deferent and brahmanic"

(Narasimhaiah 47) is the one who will initiate the Kanthapurans into the ideals of Gandhi. It is interesting to note that Gandhian principles reach the villagers through "harikathas" recited by Jayaramachar. Politicization of the villagers in view of the neatly divided community into Bahamins, Sudras and Pariahs, with their separate quarters in Kanthapura is difficult unless everybody is brought together under one banner. So, Moorthy goes from house to house for collection of funds for the "Harikathas". It is scandalous for Moorthy, to enter the pariah quarters at this stage of the novel and the villagers are rather apathetic towards Gandhi's social programme. Gandhi's campaign for the removal of untouchability, more than any programme, shocks the religious sensibility of the villagers. The female narrator Achakka describes how she was shocked when she heard Moorthy had gone to Pariah quarters:

I closed my ears when I heard he  
went to the Pariah quarter. We said  
to ourselves, he is one of these Gandhian,  
who say there is neither caste nor  
clan nor family and yet they pray  
like us and live like us" (Kanthapura 15-  
16)

The shrewd Moorthy knows that the master-key to the rustic Indian mind is religion. He gauges rightly that the only way of delivering

Gandhiji's message to his own people is through religion. So he organizes religious functions at the Kanthapurishwary Temple which is the nerve centre of the village. Jayaramachar is a harikatha man, who "had done Harikatha' even before the Mahatma" (P 16). In his 'Harikatha' the past and the present are juxtaposed and contemporary events and personalities are constantly linked-up with Puranic Gods and epic-heroes and heroines. Using the mythological story of Siva and Parvathi, they are made aware of Gandhian ideas and social progress: "Siva is the three eyed", he (Jayaramachar) says, "and Swaraj too is three eyed: self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, khadar" (P 16). One of the Haikathas, the narrator recalls, is entitled" birth of Gandhi" In the villagers' imagination, Gandhi is supposed to have been born in order to kill "the serpent of the foreign rule" (P 18). To them, the ideas of Gandhi occur in terms of a traditional Hindu mind:

Fight, says he, but harm no soul,  
Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohamedan,  
Christian, or Pariah, for all are  
equal before God. Don't be attached  
to riches, says he, for riches create  
passions and passions create  
attachment and attachment hides the  
face of Truth. Truth must you tell,

he says, for truth is God...And he says

too, spin everyday" (P 18)

Throughout this familiar and effective means of bhajans and "Harikatha Kalashepams", Moorthy tries to infuse nationalism into the minds of the uneducated Kanthapurians. The friends of Moorthy throw away their foreign clothes and become Gandhi's men. The narrator refers also to the burning of foreign clothes by Moorthy and his friends who become "Gandhi's men" (P 19) but Moorthy and these Gandhimen had to face lot of incomprehension and suspicion on account of what these village women call. " This Gandhi affair"(P 22). The boys go around distributing free spinning wheels to them. The pariahs are happy to see the Brahmin Moorthy in their midst but they hesitate to join him. Once they are convinced that Gandhi means it all for their economic good,

"They would spin and spin, if that

Brahmin boy was to be believed,

they would have clothes to wear,

blankets and shirts and loin clothes.

They said it was all of the Mahatma"

(P 26)

Raja Rao brings in the issues of the opening of the temples to Pariahs whom Gandhi called 'Harijans'. Factually, untouchability, being one of the major issues on the agenda of Gandhian social programmes, had serious

repercussions for caste Hindus. It is ironical that it is the Brahmin boy Moorthy himself who becomes the agent of Gandhian ideas in Kanthapura. And his ex-communication from the folds of the Brahmin community earns him even his mother's displeasure. Moorthy's widowed mother commits suicide out of shame at her son's behavior. But Moorthy feels peculiarly electrified and he brings to his mind the words of Gandhi:

"There is but one force in life and

that is Truth there is but one

love in life and that is the love of

mankind and there is but one God in

life and that is the God of all" (P 40).

Overwhelmed by the change taking place within him, Moorthy shivers, weeps softly and in the end, peace dawns on him.

The Skeffington Coffee Estate, owned by the Europeans is notorious for its ill-treatment of the workers and its lack of minimum facilities for them. Moorthy comes to know of it and goes there to take stock of the situation. The very hope of Moorthy coming to rescue them is moral boost to the coolies of the Coffee Estate. They feel bold enough to say, "what is a policeman before a Gandhi's men" (P 62). Bada Khan resists the entry of Moorthy into the Estate and he swings his lathi and hits Moorthy. On seeing this, the ladies Rachanna

and Madanna fall on Bade Khan and tearing away the lathi, bang it on his head but Moorthy cries out, "No beating, sisters, No beatings, in the name of the Mahatma" (P 65). Hence, it is seen that Moorthy follows the Gandhian non-violent passive resistance methods of fighting the imperial power.

Moorthy undertakes three-days fast as Gandhi had done in similar condition. When he is asked to give up his fast, he is stubborn in observing it for "the fault of others is the fruit of one's own disharmony" (P 67). He feels that this fast has helped him to sublimate his feelings and strengthen him for the next task which is the launching of the non-violent, non-cooperation movement. Like Gandhi who visited the houses of the untouchables and ate with them, Moorthy being modeled in the image of Gandhi does the same in the novel *Kanthapura*. Gandhi preached religious tolerance. This social philosophy of Gandhi is also shared by Moorthy who abandons riches and remains unmarried. Moorthy is a creature of flesh and blood, with ordinary human weakness. He is an average young man proving to be a Satyagrahi in this novel.

Unlike Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan looks at the political movement of India's struggle for Independence through the glasses of a humanist. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan's obvious intention is to show the nature and extent of Gandhi's impact on the

nature and extent of Gandhi's impact on the average Indian. Sriram's character provides Narayan an apt illustration of the whole process of this impact. In the words of A.N.Kaul, "Waiting for the Mahatma is neither a successful political novel nor a good comedy" (Kaul 227) Walsh, on the other hand, is of the opinion that "the genius of Mahatma is shown to be the most exquisite, the purest, the most incandescent honesty and commonsense" (Walsh 16) Walsh emphasized the point that Gandhi in this novel "also has that quality of curious, unsentimental dryness, Narayan appears to attribute to those he admires most" (P 18)

The plot of the novel is woven round the process of change in Sriram from the unruffled existence of a somnolent, directionless youngman in Malgudi into a socially and politically aware and responsible Indian national. Sriram's attraction for Bharati signifies his personal search for a frame of reference for life and Bharati is an agent of this. It is his curiosity about the fund collecting girl that makes him ask the jiggery merchant who informs him about the coming of the Mahatma to Malgudi Sriam's reaction to the news is significant;:

"Sriram suddenly came out of an age-old somnolence, and woke to the fact that Malgudi was about to have the honour of receiving Mahatma Gandhi"

(WM 14)

Sriram finds himself “waiting for the Mahatma” on the sands of Sarayu. His first exposure to Gandhi is directly through Gandhi’s own choice addressing the congregation of devotional Malgudians. He hears Gandhi giving his mantra of “Ramdhun, spinning on the charkha and the practice of absolute truth and Non-Violence” (WM 17) to the people of Malgudi. But it is a little later when he is personally confronted with Gandhi’ question “when exactly do you want to do?”, that Sriram, like other Narayan heroes, is baffled. Gandhi like a psychoanalyst draws Sriram but to say that he would simply like to be where Bharati is. But initially, this is how he joins the Gandhi fold. He passes through the girl of Gandhian discipline in the camp where all aspects of his thought are actually practiced.

Sriram becomes “an accredited member of the Gandhian group. This takes him to village life where he sees hungry men and women with skin stretched over their bones. In an unobtrusive way, Narayan touches on the basic issue of Gandhian campaign, the colonial exploitation especially during the World War. When Gandhi leaves Malgudi in a train at Koppal station;

“The thought of having to live a mundane existence without Mahatmaji appalled him. Not even the proximity of Bharati seemed to mitigate his misery” (WM 62)

Even when Gandhi is not present in Malgudi, Sriram feels that his “movements are being guided” (P 63). Living almost a hermit’s life in a shrine up-on the slopes of Manphi Hills, he receives communication from Gandhi through Bharati. This time it is the Quit India call of 1942. The job of painting ‘Quit India’ on walls takes Sriram to the interiors of the villages and his encounters are of varied kinds from Mathieson of the Coffee Plantation to the Shopkeeper of the Solur village. The people of Solur Village are unimaginable apathetic to Gandhi’s idea of Swaraj. Sriram finds shopkeepers selling foreign goods and helping the loyalties . It is sheer incomprehension on their part of what Gandhi really stood for.

Sriram represents an ordinary average man with all his weaknesses and Narayan's intention is to show the impact of Gandhian ideas on a section of a society that Sriram, a small town man represents. His weaknesses and failures only make him more human. In any case, Gandhian way was not easy to follow in its totality. And Sriram's journey before he finally realises himself in the Gandhian way is a painful one indeed. His participation in the terrorist activities that lands him in jail convinces him of the rightness of the Gandhian path. Sriram's association with Jagdish's terrorist activities is presented as a deviation from the Gandhian path. this also gives Narayan a reason to thrash out two different ideological points of

view - Gandhian and the Marxist - representing non-violence and violence respectively. It is significant that chastened by the jail experiences, Sriram finally submits himself to Gandhian philosophy. This makes Narayan's prime concern in the novel clear, which is as Keith Garebian says, " a moral pattern - the vindication of Gandhi and the conversion of Sriram " (Garebian 90)

To conclude, viewed in the light of the novelist's intention, the novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* presents in all details the nature of Gandhian impact on the common man of India . In Kanthapura, Gandhiji's impact conveyed through Moorthy , transforms the life of an entire community from the bondage of high-bound orthodoxy to struggle and sacrifice for an ideal. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the impact of Gandhi transmitted through Bharati changes the whole life of Sriram bringing him out of the smug, Somolence of pampered adolescene. Both of

them are Gandhian heroes transformed and changed rather, individually, socially and also politically in one way or the other.

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*There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*

- Albert Einstein