

Revisiting Gandhian Philosophy: A Critical Study of R K Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*

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Abstract

R K Narayan's novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* covers in considerable detail the years of political turmoil preceding the Partition of India, taking Mahatma Gandhi as one of its leading characters. The article attempts to analyse how the novel illustrates the role of Gandhi as a political leader and philosophical guide and the influence of his ideology and philosophy on other characters during the Indian independence movement. First, it pinpoints Gandhi's philosophical thoughts as documented in his own writings and activities and then points out how those are integrated into the novel. The article also investigates the attitudes of Gandhi's followers (as the characters of the novel) as well as those of the common people towards his thoughts and activities. Thus, the study aims to offer a textual analysis of the novel by revisiting Gandhian philosophy focusing, especially, on values of ahimsa, Satyagraha and non-violent resistance.

Keywords: South Asian writing in English, Gandhism, Satyagraha, Non-violent resistance, Civil disobedience, Partition of India

Introduction and Background

Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), written after eight years of India's Partition, is the most political novel by R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) who is considered to be one of the pioneers of South Asian Writing in English. Although some of his contemporary novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao somewhat brought an image or presence of Gandhi in their respective novels e.g. *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938), Narayan in this novel presents the Mahatma as a real character, depicting different dimensions of his political and philosophical ideologies. Presenting Mahatma as a character in fiction is quite challenging, considering the vitality and vivacity of the person himself. Gandhi has been portrayed from several perspectives in the novel. However, Narayan who was not a politically committed novelist has left the portrayal of Gandhi up to interpretations of the readers.

A political thinker and man of action, Gandhi was not a typical philosopher. He lived through his philosophy by leading the Indians to achieve certain moral qualities in order to struggle against British colonisation. His philosophical thoughts took shape in the face of racial violence and persecution during his stay in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. After his visit to London in 1908 as a member of the Indian Delegation, during his return voyage to South Africa on the ship he wrote the book *Hind Swaraj* (1909) in Gujarati (its English translation was published in 1910).

In this book, he sketched his political philosophy by coining and explaining the term “Satyagraha”. Written in a question-answer format, the book was a reply to “the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa” (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*) who wanted national independence through acts of violence in response to colonial violence. Gandhi thereupon took up non-violence as his political philosophy throughout his life in any circumstance. He explained the context, “I came in contact with every known Indian anarchist in London. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I felt that violence was no remedy for India’s ills, and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self- protection.” Significantly, Gandhi identified violence as one of social or national ills that would accelerate more violence, division, disorder and discrimination and not bring true independence to Indians. In fact, his ideas of non-violence as a tool for political resistance against oppression and discrimination got global recognition and could influence several global movements such as the liberation movement led by Martin Luther King in the US and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Mahatma Gandhi could realise aptly that the Indians were yet to be prepared morally for attaining and retaining the independence. The events before and after the Partition, most particularly his assassination in the following months of the Partition testify to the fact that most Indians who had joined the independence movement were not substantially transformed into Satyagrahis. Thus, one may ask, was his philosophy inscribed only in books and treatises, not in practice of the masses? Religious hatred against and persecution of minorities in the respective countries of the Indian subcontinent have been rampant ever since the Partition. In fact, the entire world entangled in chaos, violence and disorder has long forgotten the worth of Gandhian philosophy. In this context, the article attempts to revisit Gandhi’s philosophical thoughts and actions by analysing Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* in order to make a point that the present world of disorder needs to be aware of the values of ahimsa, satyagraha and non-violent resistance.

In doing so, we have divided the present study into two sections. The first section comprises major politico-philosophical thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi drawn mainly from his own writings and activities during India’s independence movement. The second section offers a textual analysis of the novel to evaluate how far, how elaborately, and how authentically his philosophical, ideological and political concepts are presented in the text. In doing so, with reference to the novel, we will look into his speeches, his activities, his followers’ attitudes towards his thoughts and actions, and overall reactions of Gandhian philosophy among the common people.

Literature Review

Although Narayan is the most discussed novelist among his contemporaries, *Waiting for the Mahatma* has remained the less discussed one. Cynthia Vanden Driesen in her “R.K. Narayan’s Neglected Novel: *Waiting for the Mahatma*” reflects on several aspects of the novel saying how this particular novel has remained quite unexplored though it significantly bridges the political scenario before and after the Partition. Fakrul Alam in “Reading R.K.Narayan Postcolonially” states that the novel “seems to be doing a postmortem on the roles played by Indians in their struggle for freedom and their consequence.” (*Imperial Entanglements*). S M Hasan has pointed out, “The novel vividly delineates the nature of Gandhian mobilisation, the “Quit India” campaign, non-cooperation movements, the birth of Indian bureaucracy, and the emergence of neo-colonial politicians just after the British left India.”

Gandhi as a character of the novel has drawn much attention from the critics and commentators. Considering Narayan’s treatment towards the character Gandhi and his views, the critics are sometimes divided in their opinion when they find him as an ordinary character in the novel. However, an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of Gandhi in this under-explored novel is rare in previous studies. Satish C.Aikant states, “In the novel the portrait of Gandhi is not a focal point for the narration of political events or the overall impact of Gandhi on them asses; it is rather the story of the infatuation of Sriram for Bharati and his half-hearted embrace

of Gandhian ideas for her sake”. Driesen claims that the novel has “a markedly picaresque quality” since Sriram, the central character does not show any significant change though he is “presented against a constantly changing background”. In this regard, Aikant’s comment is worth mentioning, “Much of the narrative rests on the divergence between Gandhi’s teachings and the manner in which the people adopt these in practice”. Driesen also points out that through the dubious and scrupulous followers of Gandhi Narayan offers the reader “an impression of a cross-section of the kinds of responses evoked by Gandhi - sceptical, hypocritical, frankly hostile or simply indifferent”.

Aikant argues that people seemed to be “remaining indifferent to, or simply uncomprehending of, his emphasis on developing an individual self-awareness and vision and his unique weapons of *ahimsa and satyagraha* to fight colonial rule”; they adopted Gandhi’s ideologies only when it suited them or served them a purpose. On the same vein Jasbir Jain mentions how the ever so benevolent and compassionate Gandhi was well aware of the hypocrites and opportunists that surround him. However, Narayan has been criticised to some extent for treating Gandhi like the hero who attains martyrdom for the sake of the real couple in the novel to find happy ending. In this regard, Jain points out, “Gandhi, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, is beginning to lose his hold over his followers, some of whom move away from his policies towards revolutionary methods, tired of the pacifism of their leader. And Gandhi knowingly moves towards martyrdom at the hands of his people”. Alam points out, “by the time the novel ends it is easy to see that except for a few Indians like Bharati most of the people Sriram comes across have not changed at all.” (R.K.Narayan and the End of British India).

Driesen has discussed the contrasting characters of the Mahatma and Sriram who, according to him, are a “saint” and a “shrewd” respectively. This parallel treatment of the two heroes in the novel, considering how Gandhi can never be less than a hero, no matter what the amount of gravity he holds in the plot, has made Gandhi’s own perspectives and philosophy hidden from the readers. Exploring the representation of Gandhian ideology or Gandhi as a

character in Indian novels including *Waiting for the Mahatma* Jain concludes that now the focus is on “Gandhi the man”. However, he too has not explored at length Gandhi’s epistemology and philosophy found in the novel which we will highlight in our present paper. Therefore, we are going to make an attempt to further the discussion on Gandhi’s philosophy and its portrayal in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Let us first outline the major aspects of his philosophical ideas.

Theories and Concepts: Gandhi’s Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “My life is my message” when he was asked to give his message to the world (Burrowes). He was not such a philosopher who would recline against a chair for writing his philosophical treatise. His philosophy is reflected mostly through his lifestyle, not merely through his written pieces. Precisely speaking, he evolved as the most influential national leader of Indian independence struggle through his firm ideology of non-violence and active involvement with anti-colonial movements in South Africa and India. A broad body of scholarly works, cultural rendition and even works in popular culture are available idealising or glorifying his philosophy. Criticism and counter arguments against his ideas are also prevalent. However, in any discussion on Gandhi’s philosophy, as W.H. Morris-Jones comments, “It is important to grasp Gandhi’s character as above all a man of action, acted upon and acting, sensitive to environment and eager to make his mark upon it too”. In his lifetime the term “Gandhism” even appeared conceptualising his ideas, activities and insights. However, he did not approve any sect or school of philosophy in his name by asserting that “There is no such thing as ‘Gandhism’ and I do not want to leave any sect after me” (Beckerlegge). He further states, “Well, all my philosophy, if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said”. However, his philosophy was mainly founded on two universal concepts such as Satyagraha (holding on truth) and ahimsa (non-violence).

Satyagraha

Satyagraha means “holding onto truth” or being committed to truth. In Gandhi’s words,

Satyagraha is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force. Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul force. It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish. (Non-Violent Resistance)

Satyagraha essentially endows its followers with an essence of firmness while urging them to avoid any form of anger, violence or force. A person who adopts this way of life is called a Satyagrahi. A Satyagrahi with his commitment to holding on truth attains a force that he can use against anyone and any force in any circumstance. Gandhi further explicates, “Such a universal force necessarily makes no distinction between kinsmen and strangers, young and old, man and woman, friend and foe.” (*Non-Violent Resistance*). But this force never implies any form of physical force as Gandhi strictly maintains, “There is in it no room for violence”. Rather, this force can be universally applied through ahimsa or love, which is the source of a Satyagrahi’s mental strength. It is called “soul-force”. Gandhi articulates so clearly, “Love does not burn others, it burns itself. Therefore, a Satyagrahi, i.e. a civil resister, will joyfully suffer even unto death”. Thus, Satyagraha conforms to democratic practice as Satyagraha by principle does not discriminate among people; rather, it is another form of self-sacrifice (a soul force). Besides, a Satyagrahi is charged with love, not with hatred. More than this, on different occasions, Gandhi himself elaborated on various dimensions of Satyagraha throughout his life.

Gandhi set up ashrams where individuals trained practically in Satyagraha principles. A Satyagrahi was to take vows on certain principles that he/ she must follow in his/ her daily, social and political life. The following 11 principles were sent by Gandhi in 1930 from the Yeravda Jail to the members of his Ashram at Sabarmati -

“Truth, Nonviolence, Chastity, Nonpossession, Fearlessness, Control of the Palate (appetite), Non-stealing, Bread-Labour, Equality of Religions, Anti-untouchability and Swadeshi.” (Non-Violent Resistance).

Ahimsa

Ahimsa, a religious virtue in Jainism and Buddhism is one of the main sources of Gandhi’s

Satyagraha. Gandhi developed ahimsa into “a modern concept with broad political consequences, as satyagraha” by drawing from both Western sources such as The Bible and Leo Tolstoy and Eastern sources such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. (“Satyagraha”). Gandhi who was ever inspired and guided by *Bhagavad Gita* wrote a commentary on it and derived the message of ahimsa in the light of his reading the *Gita*. By elaborating on this verse of the *Gita* “Do your allotted work but renounce its fruit - be detached and work - have no desire for reward and work”, he claims, “This is the unmistakable teaching of the *Gita*. He who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises. But renunciation of fruit in no way means indifference to the result.” (*The Bhagavad Gita: According to Gandhi*). The philosophical base of Satyagraha also lies in the *Gita*. Gandhi in formulating his ideology of Satyagraha borrowed from the verses of the *Gita* where the three *gunas* (modes) such as *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (ignorance) are described. (*The Bhagavad Gita: According to Gandhi*).

Non-violent Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience

Non-cooperation movement guided by the principles of Satyagraha during 1920s was derived from Gandhi’s idea that the British were able to rule India due to the cooperation of Indians (*Hind Swaraj*). Therefore, maintaining non-cooperation with the government could be an effective way to go a step further to the path of India’s independence. He denounced Western products asserting that Indians were helping bring poverty to their own country by buying the British products and in this way Indian money was being looted (*Hind Swaraj*). A way of self-purification for the Indians would be to start making their own provisions and products. Therefore, the followers of Gandhi were urged to weave their own clothes with the help of “charka”, a spinning tool.

About Civil Disobedience in 1930s Gandhi explained that his civil disobedience is of a different nature from that of Henry David Thoreau. He claimed that he came up with the idea of Satyagraha before he came across Thoreau’s essay titled “Civil Disobedience” (1849). Gandhi declared,

The statement that I had derived my idea of civil disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on civil disobedience... When I saw the title of Thoreau's great essay, I began the use of his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers. But I found that even civil disobedience failed to convey the full meaning of the struggle. I therefore adopted the phrase civil resistance. Non-violence [Satyagraha] was always an integral part of our struggle. (The Collected Works).

Gandhi stated that civil disobedience is an inherent right of every citizen (Somerville and Santoni). Whereas passive resistance is mainly applied by the oppressed and the aggrieved who cannot afford armed or active resistance, non-violent resistance, clarified by Gandhi, is not conceived as “a weapon of the weak.”, but rather a choice of the strongest. He stressed several times that “It is a movement intended to replace methods of violence and a movement based entirely upon truth.” (*Non-Violent Resistance*). Gandhi further clarified the question of breaking law in non-violent non-cooperation movement, upholding the self-dignity of Satyagrahis - “It is contrary to our manhood if we obey laws repugnant to our conscience. Such teaching is opposed to religion and means slavery. If the Government were to ask us to go about without any clothing, should we do so?” (*Non-Violent Resistance*).

Thus, Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha and ahimsa denotes a force of truth integrated into the non-violence and non-cooperation movements. The followers of these virtues are supposed to be reborn with self-purification and became ready for self-sacrifice. Gandhi stated, “Ever since 1921 I have been reiterating two words, *self-purification and self-sacrifice*. God will not assist him without these two. The world is touched by sacrifice... He (God) insists on the purity of the cause and on adequate sacrifice therefore.” (*Non-Violent Resistance*). Gandhi maintained his philosophy of Satyagraha, ahimsa and nonviolence during all major upsurge under his leadership, from Swaraj to Non-cooperation to Civil Disobedience to Salt Satyagraha to Call for India's Independence and finally Quit India movement.

Waiting for the Mahatma mainly focuses on the Quit India campaign during the Second World

War, along with periodical references to non-violent non-cooperation movements. Let us now trace the reflection of Gandhian philosophy in the fictional depiction of political events in the novel.

Revisiting Gandhian Philosophy in *Waiting for the Mahatma*

Like other major novels of Narayan, *Waiting for the Mahatma* is set in the fictional town Malgudi. Sriram, the protagonist of the novel is a high school graduate who lives with his grandmother after his mother and father passed away. Sriram is little informed of the outside world. His immaturity or naivety is apparent in the very first of the novel where he is engaged in conversing with his granny - “It's going to be your twentieth birthday, although you behave as if you are half that” (Narayan). On an occasion he is attracted to Bharati, a girl of his age who is active in Mahatma Gandhi's “Quit India” movement, and becomes an activist himself not for his devotion to Gandhi's political ideology and principles, but for his irresistible attraction to the Gandhian activist Bharati. Narayan seems to experiment with an ordinary folk like Sriram who is involved in almost all the major events leading to Indian independence in order to underscore whether Gandhian philosophy was able to transform most Indians.

The first arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in the plot of the novel is quite dramatic amidst a large number of audience waiting eagerly on the bank of Sarayu River in a South Indian fictional city Malgudi. He addresses the crowd who have yet settled down to pay attention to his speech.

“I notice two men there talking,’ boomed Gandhi ji's voice. ‘It's not good to talk now, when perhaps the one next to you is anxious to listen. If you disturb his hearing, it is one form of himsa.’” (Narayan).

So, Gandhi is there to speak about ahimsa by explaining to the audience how to lead a disciplined life and strengthen moral qualities so that they can attain independence for their country. He firmly states,

We, the citizens of this country, are all soldiers of a non-violent army, but even such an army has to practise a few things daily in order to keep itself in proper condition: . . . But we have a system of our own to follow: that's Ram Dhun; spinning on the charka

and the practice of absolute Truth and Non-violence.
(Narayan).

That is, focusing on his idea of non-violence and Satyagraha he tried heart and soul to bring about changes in his followers by urging them to change themselves from inside.

One can notice anticolonial notes in Gandhi's explanation of using Hindi while delivering public speeches, "I will not address you in English. It's the language of our rulers. It has enslaved us." (Narayan). He always wanted to be sure about the pure faith of his followers. He says, "I want you really to make sure of a change in your hearts before you ever think of asking the British to leave the shores of India.... If I have the slightest suspicion that your heart is not pure or that there is bitterness there, I'd rather have the British stay on. It's the lesser of two evils". But against the objection from the British Raj that Indians would not be able to maintain law and order in the country after they left, he showed his firm commitment to his goal of getting the complete independence for India while being fully devoted to Satyagraha principles. That is why, he is putting emphasis on his followers attaining moral qualities so that he can tell the British, "Please leave this country to be managed or mismanaged by us, that's purely our own business, and come back any time you like as our friends and distinguished guests, not as our rulers,".

Gandhi could understand people's intentions and read their minds (Narayan). In the novel Gandhi is on some occasions disturbed with disorder and indiscipline. He tried hard to inculcate his ideology of Satyagraha in people's minds but most of them were not fully responsive to his call. The novel depicts in several places the chaotic nature of crowds, which is rather very common in Indian contexts. The novel reads, "The crowd was so noisy that Mahatmaji had to remonstrate once or twice. When he held up his hand the crowd subsided and waited to listen to him. He said quietly, 'This is sheer lack of order, which I cannot commend. Your Chairman is reading something and I am in courtesy bound to know what he is saying. You must all keep quiet'".

Although the novel portrays the Mahatma as a character, it does not entirely or chronologically tell his story, but rather the story of Sriram's

peregrination into a confused world of love, loss and politics. Sriram is awed during his first meeting with Mahatma, seeing him as a human being "doing several things at the same time." (Narayan). Gandhi himself used to spin his charka in order to make his own khaddar clothes. As a busy leader he is found to be multitasking -

While his hands were spinning, his eyes perused a letter held before him by another, and he found it possible too to put in a word of welcome to Sriram. Through the back door of the hut many others were coming in and passing out. For each one of them Mahatma ji had something to say. (Narayan).

Spinning a certain length is his "most important work" (Narayan). He even made his followers take vows that they would make their own khaddar clothes by spinning charka. He tells Sriram,

"I'd very much like you to take a vow to wear only cloth made out of your own hands each day."

Thus, the novel depicts Gandhi as a pragmatic leader and philosopher who used to eat, sleep, walk, talk, speak, spin and do all human activities and urged his followers to do the same as no work should be considered inferior. It is not only a way of nurturing democratic spirit in oneself, but becoming self-reliant and growing self-respect in him/ her, which is one of the prerequisites to be a Satyagrahi. Most importantly, making own clothes was a common task for both men and women, which denotes egalitarian practice among the Gandhian activists. Besides, the act of weaving clothes by using charka is one of the symbolic manifestations of Satyagraha identity. Therefore, Gandhi's idea of renunciation and self-restraint, two core values of Satyagraha, is well presented in the novel.

Narayan very subtly gives a hint that Gandhi took firm stand for the rights of the untouchables. During his Malgudi campaign he pays a visit to the abodes of the untouchables and spends time with them. The untouchables or out castes are as usual forced to live in hovels outside the town on the banks of the river, which is "probably the worst area in Malgudi town" (Narayan). On caste issues Gandhi has been criticised for his inconsistent statements and reluctance to abolish Casteism and Varna system though he personally did not practise the rituals of untouchability. In the novel while Gandhi is offering fruits to a bunch of children in Neel Bagh,

the palatial building of the Municipal Chairman, he spots an untouchable boy who is standing apart from the rest, on the very edge of the crowd. Mahatma “had the young urchin hoisted beside him on the divan.” (Narayan). He is “a small dark fellow with a protruding belly and wearing nothing over his body except a cast-off knitted vest, adult size, full of holes, which reached down to his ankles.” This incident invites severe reactions from the people present there. “The Chairman was bewildered”; his “blood boiled” and he feels “little annoyance with Mahatmaji himself”. To the Chairman it is not a problem to show affection to the poor, but in no circumstance he could tolerate the presence of “a dirty boy, an untouchable”. This reaction results from strict adherence to Casteism that most Indian Hindus could not disregard. Sriram’s grandmother also shows the same reaction, complaining that Gandhi “tried to bring untouchables into the temples”.

Although Gandhi was faced with severe opposition from Vaishnavas² and other radical Hindus, he made attempts to bring about reforms regarding the existing caste system. Sujay Biswas asserts, “In both words and actions, Gandhi attacked untouchability in ways that was radical for a ‘caste Hindu’ himself”. It will not be irrelevant to mention that differing from Gandhi on the caste issue, Babasaheb Ambedkar professed the elimination of the entire system by “identifying the problem as the “symptom” of the entire system, the symptom which can only be resolved by way of abolishing the entire system.” (Zizek). But Gandhi accepted the system as essential and fundamental, calling the outcastes or untouchables euphemistically “Harijans” (children of God) and “allowing them to ‘fall in love with themselves’ in their humiliating identity, to accept their degrading work as a noble necessary social task, to perceive even the degrading nature of their work as a sign of their sacrifice, of their readiness to do the dirty job for society”.

In the novel Narayan projects a sense of humour into Gandhi’s character in order to show that he was a man living on this very earth. When Sriram, in his natural clumsiness, says, ‘Yes. My grandmother is very old.’ Mahatma replies with humour and people start laughing.

“Yes, she must be, otherwise how can you call her a grandmother?” People laughed, Sriram too joined in this laughter out of politeness.” (Narayan).

Besides, Gandhi enjoys the company of children. When in the big house of the Municipal Chairman he is offered fresh oranges, he beckons to a little boy to come nearer. The other boys immediately follow him and Mahatma offers all of them oranges. The tray is soon empty and more oranges are supplied. The Chairman feels upset because “The event was developing into a children party.” (Narayan).

Gandhi’s holy and saintly image is also provided in the novel. He could influence and mesmerise people with his strong personality. His silence depicted in the novel would help the readers understand the gravity of his character (Narayan). Besides, a sort of tranquillity and spiritual peace is created by his presence. Sriram is fascinated and charmed by the serenity reflected through Gandhi’s observation on the beauty of nature.

When Sriram finds Bharati entirely involved in Mahatma Gandhi’s cause, he makes up his mind to join the movement. However, he eventually becomes aware of his limitations when he is faced with something ideological requiring full concentration, devotion and self-sacrifice.

He could not grasp what he [Gandhi] was saying, but he looked rapt, he tried to understand and concentrate. This was the first time he felt the need to try and follow something, the first time that he found himself at a disadvantage. . . . This was the first time he was assailed by doubts of his own prowess and understanding. (Narayan).

Sriram then gets the message from Gandhi’s speeches and from Bharati that he has to tell “the absolute truth and nothing less than that and nothing more than that” in any circumstance (Narayan). Besides, he has learned that he cannot harm anybody and do anything excessive; he will have to maintain self-restraint since Gandhi insists on controlling the gazes of young people. But it does not seem so easy to Sriram to leave his home and grandmother and join the non-violent resistance. When Mahatma asks him, “What exactly do you want to do?”, he loses his sense of reason, being jam-packed with “a rush of ideas” and cannot form a sentence to give an answer. Then at last his subconscious desires for getting Bharati “jerked the sentence out of his

lips, and he said, ‘I like to be where Bharati is.’” So, Bharati is his ultimate inspiration whose name (Bharati, “the daughter of India”) was given by the Mahatma after her father was martyred during 1920s non-cooperation movement. Thus, it is significant that Sriram innocently admits the truth that he is with the Mahatma due to Bharati and her company.

Sriram becomes a changed man in Chapter Two of the novel. He spends much time with Bharati and Gorpad getting educated and trained in Gandhian principles. He is now “an accredited member of the group” (Narayan). For the first time in his life he visits “actual villages” and is occasionally treated with respect by the villagers. He learns to spin the charka and weave his own khaddar clothes. In this phase of the Quit India campaign people were asked to burn the foreign goods in their possession in protest against the British Raj. Getting fully involved in the campaign, Sriram burns his old clothes and firmly declares, “I will never again wear clothes spun by machinery”. He writes to the Mahatma, “Burnt my old clothes today. Spun 40 count. Bharati satisfied.” And gets an immediate reply from him, “Very pleased. Keep it up. God bless you”. Through self-sacrifice his heart gets purified and he discovers his self that liberates him from his existential crisis. “He felt he had seen and reached a new plane of existence”. Bharati is always there to teach him not only spinning, but also many other things. It is Mahatma Gandhi who in fact instructs Bharati to prepare Sriram to be a true Satyagrahi. Sriram is even advised to consider her as his “Guru” but he seems reluctant to take Bharati seriously. Nevertheless, they make their political and philosophical journey together.

Sriram takes shelter in an abandoned temple on “the higher reaches of Mempi Hills” to avoid attention from the police. Now he is not with the Mahatma but he feels that his movements are being observed by him; that is, he can feel the presence of the Mahatma (Narayan). One day Bharati comes to inform him that the Mahatma has been in prison since the August of 1942, the year when Gandhi declared the Quit India movement. She further instructs him to go for the Quit India mission, providing him with a can of paint and a brush”. By writing “Quit India” on every wall, every tree and every place of

near and far villages Sriram tries to make the British understand that they are not required in India; they must quit India.

Sriram gets mixed experiences of continuing Quit India mission. He is sometimes opposed, ridiculed and even instructed by the loyalists (who were loyal to the British Raj) and the villagers; again he gets respect in some places. The novel gives quite details of the reactions and opposition of the villagers through some humorous descriptions in Chapter Two. For instance, a village teacher advises Sriram to write “Quiet India” by adding an extra “e” before “t” instead of “Quit India” because he thinks what people “need in this country is not a “Quit” programme, but a “Quiet India”.” (Narayan). Nevertheless, Sriram goes on “doing things in a machine like manner”, entering forests and villages to convey Mahatma’s message. Sometimes, he writes, “Quit India” but “it was followed by loyalists amending it with: ‘Don’t’ or an ‘I’ before ‘Quit’”. Sriram feels confused and disheartened by observing the sheer negligence of the common people to the grand cause of Indian independence. His frustration is thus presented in the novel, “All his own activity seemed to him meaningless. He might as well return to the cosy isolation of Kabir Street ...”

On the other hand, Sriram’s encounter with Mathieson, an English owner of tea estates reveals the reaction of Quit India movement among the British traders and the political and economic reality of colonial India. Though Sriram on his face utters Gandhi’s message that “you must quit India”, Mathieson makes his argument that the English do not want to quit India; rather some of them think that it is their right to live in India as long as they wish since they are creating jobs for poor Indians (Narayan). In response to his logic, Sriram, however, retorts in angry tone, “You are doing it for your own profit. You think we can only be your servants and nothing else,... Aren’t you afraid? You are all alone, if the Indians decide to throw you out, it may not be safe”.

The novel presents Sriram as a purely human being. On an occasion, he becomes aroused by Bharati’s tender touch and shows his madness to have her at any cost (Narayan). The outburst of Sriram’s repressed desire proves that he is like any

other human beings having all sorts of weakness and desire. When Sriram insists on marrying her as early as possible, she tells him that without Mahatma's consent she cannot marry him. In her words, "Bapu has better things to do than finding a husband for me". In fact, in Gandhi's opinion, "A few Indians need to marry at the present time [the time of national movement]" (Mehta).

A close reading the novel reveals that Sriram differs with the Mahatma in his attitudes towards women. Sriram, like most Indian men consider women to be wives only (Narayan). However, Gandhi with his philosophical thoughts and activism contributed greatly to the campaign of female education and woman empowerment in colonial India. In his words, "When woman, whom we call abala, becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful." (*The Collected Works*).

After the Quit India movement became widespread across the country and all the Congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi were imprisoned, Gandhi from the jail issued instructions for his followers to surrender to the nearby police stations instead of resorting to violence. When Bharati brings Mahatma's message to Sriram and informs him that she is going to surrender to the police station, Sriram for the first time refuses to obey Gandhi's order with an excuse for seeing his grandmother before going to jail. He then encounters with a mysterious character Jagadish who comes to visit him in his hiding and introduces himself as a national worker. With a promise to make arrangements for meeting Bharati secretly in the Slaughter House jail he instigates Sriram to do underground activities. Sriram feels fortunate and impressed when he hears Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's voice on a rundown radio brought by Jagadish, "Men of the Indian Army, be patriots. Help us free our dear Motherland. Many of your friends are here, having joined the Indian National Army which is poised for attack on your borders. We are ready. We shall soon be across, and then you can join the fight on our side." (Narayan).

Jagadish who claims to be a follower of Subhas Bose speaks very tactfully about Gandhi. He does not say that Gandhi is wrong but tries to justify his way by explaining that as Gandhi's ultimate goal is independence, the means should be devised suitably

by the activists. He argues, "It is not his line. But when the results turn out satisfactorily, I am sure he'll say, 'You did well, my boy'." (Narayan). However, Sriram feels doubtful. He cannot think independently about the Mahatma's political ideology without the help of Bharati. He admits, "I'm not sure. Only Bharati knows exactly what Mahatmaji will say or think ...".

Sriram is then seen to conduct secret operations. By the Mahatma's order he once wrote on walls and by Jagadish's order now he pastes posters and pamphlets secretly at night. "He set fire to the records in half a dozen law courts in different villages; he derailed a couple of trains and paralysed the work in various schools; he exploded a crude bomb which tore off the main door of an agricultural research station" (Narayan). He has become so seasoned in this activity that a certain recklessness is developing in him. He has even grown his moustache to camouflage himself. Sriram is shown to be arrested in the end of the Chapter Three.

Mahatma Gandhi showed such commitment and devotion towards maintaining his ideals that his enemies even used to respect him and his followers. The popularity and widespread application of Satyagraha was recognised and respected by the colonial administration. And his party (Congress) members would be granted the status of political prisoner in jails. But Subhas Bose's followers were treated in the prison like ordinary criminals and convicts. The novel shows that Sriram is not respected as a Gandhi follower in the jail since he was arrested with a charge of carrying out violence and vandalism. He is kept in an ordinary prison cell with criminals. He himself thinks he has deviated from Satyagraha principles (Narayan). He feels that he is losing his identity as he has lost his patriotic zeal; therefore, he wonders whether he will be accepted by Bharati when she comes to know his violent activities under Jagadish's command. The novel also points out that the Gandhian prisoners are mocked by the general prisoners. But the Mahatma is mentioned even by the criminals and gangsters with respect and reverence.

When Sriram gets out of the prison, the British India has already been partitioned giving birth to two independent countries namely India and Pakistan.

Sriram watches a new India where in the form of communal riots, mass killings, mass rapes and displacement of millions of people are occurring. Because of the spread of riots in different parts of West Bengal and Noakhali, a district of the then East Pakistan, Gandhi and his followers including Bharati remain busy with pacifying the villagers walking miles after miles through villages (Narayan). The novel also refers to Mahatma Gandhi's attempt to stop brutal killings and mass rapes in Calcutta riots by fasting until his death, one of the effective ways of his non-violent protest. He firmly asserted that he would not break his fast, if Hindus and Muslims did not stop fighting with each other. In Delhi refugee camps were opened where refugee children and abducted and dishonoured women were kept. The novel thus shows Gandhi until his last breath toiling hard to build the new born country and settle disputes on several issues.

Although the appropriate projection of the Mahatma as a character into the novel is not left undebated, the reception and practice of his philosophy is quite evident among different characters of the novel. Gandhi is presented as an active, disciplined, practical and inspirational personality but almost all his followers in the novel except Bharati have failed to follow his principles. Many of his pseudo-followers are people like Natesh and Jagadish. Natesh shows off at the Mahatma's meeting not as his follower, but as a political parasite. In the meeting when his name is mentioned, someone points to him, "Some people conventionally adopt patriotism when Mahatmaji arrives" (Narayan). Jagadish has become a changed man after independence. He documented photographs of crucial moments of the Quit India campaign to prove his great contribution to India's independence. He dreams of getting as much privilege as he can out of independence. In his opinion, "there are others waiting for the privilege".

Before joining Gandhi's movement, Sriram had deep respect for Gandhi. He could guess that Gandhi had extraordinary power to differentiate between the true followers and pretenders. Sriram observes, "Gandhi seemed to be a man who spotted disturbers and cross-thinkers however far away they sat." (Narayan). Therefore, it is evident that there are people who consider Mahatma with utmost

reverence without taking pain to be a stern follower and ready for self-sacrifice and also people like his grandmother who could not accept Gandhi just because he was doing something that would break their long practised tradition such as Casteism.

When Sriram's school teacher sees him among the crowd following Gandhi after the meeting, he praises him saying that "I am proud to see you here, my boy. Join the Congress, work for the country, you will go far, God bless you ..." (Narayan). During his conversation with Sriram's grandmother he replies to her worries about Sriram,

'Don't worry, madam, he is perfectly safe. How many of us could have the privilege of being so near the Mahatma? You must be happy that he is doing so well! Our country needs more young men like him.' (Narayan).

But she retorts,

'It is teachers like you who have ruined our boys and this country,'

The novel quite interestingly demonstrates that certain cultural registers that can be termed "Gandhian culture" existed and people would display those to show their association with and loyalty to the Mahatma and his ideology (Narayan). Those registers include wearing khaddar dresses during meeting with Gandhi or joining his marches, decorating the interiors of their houses with the photos of the Mahatma and other Congress leaders, displaying artworks on Bhagavad Gita and so on. This aspect clearly indicates the existence of hypocritical followers of Gandhian philosophy. It is in fact a great irony that the Mahatma 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." (Narayan, "Back Cover")

Gandhi's philosophical vision was not fully implemented as found in the novel and he was quite aware of this fact. On the 15th of August when the whole country was celebrating the birth of independent India, he, tormented with the troubles and fatalities of his fellow Indians, stood beside the sufferers, not the celebrators (Narayan). He even wanted to sacrifice his life in order to see people appreciating and following his philosophy. Through Bharati's words the novel asserts,

“He said it would be worth dying if that would make his philosophy better understood”.

The novel ends with Gandhi's assassination just after he blessed the couple (Sriram and Bharati) in their forthcoming conjugal life. This seems to suggest that perhaps the couple might be able to keep Gandhi's spirit up despite the many who have deviated from his philosophy and idealism. It is also evident when Sriram towards the end of the novel understands, in the company of Bharati, the worth of his struggle and sacrifice for the great cause of the Mahatma. Without her, he always suffers from dilemmas and frustration. Therefore, Bharati is not just his fiancé or wife, but rather a source of his commitment to Gandhian philosophy. The novel describes, “The listener, Bharati, gave his whole life a new meaning and a new dimension. When they arrived at a colony of huts somewhere in New Delhi, he was completely satisfied with all the things he had done in his life.” (Narayan).

Conclusion

Waiting for the Mahatma is a rewarding read as the major historical facts regarding India's independence and subsequent events in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy are presented in a lucid narrative. Through the novel Narayan suggests that after the Partition the message of the great leader was cast aside by the personal passion and self-interest of many of his followers. The consequence of deviation from Gandhi's idealism implies the post-partition turmoil of religious riots, hunger and unscrupulous politicians like Natesh and Jagadish. However, Sriram's portrayal as an ordinary Indian man turning into a man of self-restraint and self-sacrifice through an eventful journey of self-discovery is quite comprehensive. Gandhi's presence as one of the major characters in the novel opens up scope for revisiting Gandhian ideology. Besides, one can aptly claim that Narayan's depiction of a female protagonist Bharati with great success conveys Gandhian philosophy in the most loyal manner. Placing her in all the process of independence movement and naming her Bharati symbolising India itself, Narayan presents a loyal follower of Gandhian teaching unlike other characters of the novel.

Thus, the article has analysed how Gandhi has had an all-pervasive presence throughout the novel with his dynamic characteristics and ideologies that he employed in moulding young minds such as Bharati, Gopad and Sriram. In addition, it has brought out the major philosophical traits that Gandhi preached such as Satyagraha, ahimsa, his treatment of untouchability, and woman empowerment and so on. It has also pointed out his devotion and commitment to his ideology of non-violence, love and self-sacrifice that would earn him respect and reach him to his goal of establishing not only a British-free India but also an India that can govern itself. Through textual analysis of the novel the article has illustrated that Mahatma Gandhi was a cordial, compassionate and practical man with his sense of humour which he so aptly put to use at times. We have attempted to do justice to R K Narayan's novel in our study of its characters including Mahatma Gandhi himself and reached the conclusion that the text, though it is a work of fiction, is in fact a mirror reflecting different dimensions of Gandhian philosophy at its best. Finally, we could not but reiterate what Gandhi claimed about himself, that his life was his message.

Notes

- The out-castes or untouchables are forced to live outside the main village, in separate quarters, not allowed to use same well meant for the Brahmins.
- Biswas quoting from Gandhi's Autobiography points out, “In 1915, while in India, when he accepted the first ‘Untouchable’ family in the Kocharb Ashram and adopted Lakshmi, an ‘Untouchable’, as a daughter, the Vaishnavs of Ahmedabad stopped all monetary help to the ashram, following which he decided to move to the ‘Untouchables’ quarters”.

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