



Impact of Gandhi on Indian Writing in English: A Study of Rao's *Kanthapura* and Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*

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Around a century ago, a leader was emerging who would change the course of a country's struggle for independence. He scripted an incredible chapter in history that depicted people belonging to different classes, castes, languages and religions becoming united to win their freedom. He showed the way of humanity and the necessity of removing the cultural baggage that has divided people from each other and taught them to see each other only as humans. Gandhi started a war which used non-violence and love for the enemy as weapons. Gandhi wanted people to eliminate inner evil before taking on the external enemy. He wanted to remove untouchability which had colonised a section of society in India for centuries. People across the country were following his directions as if enchanted by him. His efforts resulted in a revolution and were recognised worldwide.

Mahatma Gandhi is not only a universal figure but also an immortal one. He emerged first as a national and then as an international leader of immense political and philosophical significance during the pre and post-Independence phase of India. Gandhi became an immense source of inspiration and influenced different disciplines and writers from different fields like philosophy, politics, history, literature, sociology, and many more. Gandhi, with his unique approach, helped the people to rediscover the intellectual and emotional need of a national identity. It is his beliefs and writings which succeeded in bringing together the diverse cultures of the east and the west, and the traditional and the modern.

To Gandhi, societal emancipation was as significant as political emancipation. Gandhi throughout his life waged a campaign for the upliftment of the socially subjugated, creating substantial influences for the enhancement of the status of women in India. Women under his guidance, took a momentous step towards reconstructing their identity in the society. Gandhi as a role model strengthened their determination and facilitated them to revive their confidence in themselves. Not only there was a universal awakening among the women, but under Gandhi's guidance, they entered into the national mainstream, taking parts in the national movements. In Gandhi's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women (58)." Gandhi's activism helped in elevating the status of women in India.

Gandhi had helped India to gain freedom, and he is the one who paved the way for Indians towards freedom with his strategy of using and utilising the press effectively. Initially, Indian writers started writing in English to impress the Englishmen and then too they were merely concerned about the real-life problems of people and social issues. It was with the evocation of Gandhi that these writers directed the focus of their writings on the dire need of social identity and integrity in India. After the emergence of the Gandhian thought, a fundamental change could be seen in the choice of themes by Indian novelists.

Gandhism had a significant impact on the literature that was being written in India before and after Independence. Writers and readers' interest gave birth to Gandhian literature which was influenced by Gandhi and his ideals. Gandhi's thoughts inspired writers and thinkers with intellectual and moral passion and for a new mode of thinking. Gandhi's thoughts were represented by writers like R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao in their writings. It was then impossible for creative writers to ignore such a striking force affecting their society in different ways. They addressed in their works the changes taking place at an unprecedented level in the country and the man behind them. Each perceived Gandhi in a different light but acknowledged his profound influence on the individual and society. K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger in *Indian Writing in English* asserts, "Gandhi is too big to be given a minor part: on the other hand, he is sure to turn the novel in a biography if he is given a major part" (101).

R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao are the leading figures of early Indian English Literature. Rao in his writings, focuses on the evil practices existing in society as a result of ignorance and orthodoxy. He was an undeviating follower of Gandhi. Narayan, on the other hand, laid much emphasis on the importance of education for the upliftment of people and society. He pointedly criticises the western system of education and overemphasises the Indian forms of learning. His version of the Indian approach to education extends education to a profound experience since he believes that progress for Indians can only be possible through education.

Through their novels, both Rao and Narayan have best analysed how Gandhian philosophy influenced the people of India, even those living in the remote parts of the country. Gandhi aimed to eliminate poverty, casteism, untouchability and superstitions, which prevailed in India. He believed that political freedom without a healthy social base is waste. *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *Kanthapura* follow Gandhian

ideology and his principles of non-violence, truth, brotherhood, satyagraha and his views on untouchability. All the characters of these novels are rooted in Indian ethics and philosophy. They start their journey in search of truth and social equality. The characters of these novels face hurdles in achieving their desire to build an egalitarian society, yet succeed in the end. *Waiting for the Mahatma* portrays Gandhi as a great leader who is deeply concerned about the problems of ordinary people. *Kanthapura* shows the ramifications of Gandhi's struggle for India's Independence and its impact on the people of a small village.

R.K. Narayan was indeed a follower of Gandhi but had no political commitments like Mulk Raj Anand, and neither had been a metaphysical philosopher like Raja Rao. Instead, Narayan used the Gandhian philosophy in his novel to portray its effectiveness and power. William Walsh writes: Narayan is basically "a native talent natively nurtured" (42). R.K. Narayan is a master of conjugating reality with fantasy. He incorporates his personal philosophy and opinions in his literary works successfully. For Narayan, writing is not merely a storytelling exercise but, as remarked by Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination*, his novels are "a perpetual quest for reality" (212).

Narayan was deeply influenced by the Gandhian way of life. His work highlights the all-permeating influence of Gandhi. His characters are Gandhian in their own ways. His novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* was written in 1955, after the seven years of Gandhi's assassination. Throughout the novel Narayan describes the influence of Gandhian ideology on the characters. Through *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan describes the journey and metamorphosis of Sriram and his evolution from an ignorant and aimless young man to a focused and committed follower of Gandhi and a staunch freedom fighter.

Sriram is the protagonist of the novel who propagates Gandhian views and advocates the Gandhian philosophy as a way of life. This novel places Gandhi at the centre of the text. It shows the process of transformation in Sriram in his search for truth and self-realization. He is portrayed as a careless boy at the beginning of the novel who lives with his grandmother in Malgudi. His life gets its meaning when he first sees Bharti, a disciple of Gandhi. He falls in love with her and goes to attend a Gandhian camp in order to meet her. But once he finds an entry in the camp, his primary motive which was to spend time with Bharti transforms into a new relationship. K.R.S. Iyenger comments, "In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the theme is apparently Bharti and Sriram's romance which, however, gains a new dimension in the background of their common allegiance to Mahatma" (372).

When Sriram hears Gandhi's speech, he feels the need to change his lifestyle. His first meeting with Gandhi helps him to find a clear way to work, which was earlier missing in his life. Sriram was impressed by Gandhi's disregard for the practice of untouchability and his belief in equality and justice. Sriram ponders about Gandhi's idealism: "There must be a great deal in what he says. We always think we are superior people" (30). He stays in the camp and shares his room with another disciple of Gandhi, Gopad. The disciple adds new dimensions to Sriram's knowledge and shares with him the aims and objectives of the Gandhian spirit.

Sriram's first meeting with Gandhi proved to be life changer for him. Gandhi wanted Sriram to take a vow to only wear clothes made of khadi and Sriram instantly agrees to it as if he is under Gandhi's spell: "Half an hour I have to walk, come with me, Sriram. You can talk to me undisturbed" (67). Sriram visits the famine-affected areas and helps the people living there. His passion for Gandhi and his philosophy is noticed by his grandmother. She asks, "Oh! He is your god, is he?" On this Sriram replies, "Yes he is, and I won't hear any one speak lightly of him... he is not a man; he is a Mahatma" (83). When he sees Mahatma's love for the untouchables of Malgudi, he also renounces a luxurious lifestyle and prefers to stay with Harijans during his visits for campaigns. He follows the steps of Gandhi with sincerity and becomes a true representative of his thoughts and philosophy. He participates in Quit India, Satyagraha, and Swadeshi movements with great passion and commitment. He meets Jagdish, who is a representative of a group of revolutionaries. Jagdish believes in violence that contrasts with the non-violence of Gandhiji. Sriram comes into his contact and starts assisting him in his extremist activities.

However, soon Sriram realises that by destroying things and adopting violence, they cannot overthrow the British from India. He feels that Gandhi's non-violent strategies are superior to violence and aggression. His Gandhism fails after an initial passion and zeal. He is not able to fulfil the daring demands of non-violence at the next stage. He gets arrested and it is in the prison that he gets the opportunity to listen to his inner voice after receiving a letter from Mahatma, "Don't guide yourself by what you see. You should do your duty because your inner voice drives you to do it" (127-28). It is significant that subdued 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" (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.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was published in 1938. It deals with the Gandhian impact on a small village called Kanthapura. Kanthapura, a fictional village lying in the remotest part of the country, represents the margins where the people are unaware of the political upheavals and social movements taking place in the mainstream. Rao captures Kanthapura when it is about to be drawn into the freedom struggle. It is an archetypal Indian village which is stuck in the the mire of age-old traditions, conventions and orthodoxies. Rao remarks in his preface that there is no Indian village that does not have a *Sthalapurana* or legendary history of its own. Rao respects that living tradition and presents it as a reality of Indian villages.

Kanthapura can be termed as a Gandhi-epic. It reflects the impact of Gandhian ideology on the mindset of Indians. Gandhi did not appear in the novel personally yet his presence can be felt through-out the text. *Kanthapura* is the masterpiece of Raja Rao through which he truly succeeded in showing the impact of Gandhian movement on the common people of India. As stated by Gandhi in his autobiography,

“I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet with all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means” (420).

The novel begins with the description of the village by a woman Achakka. Rao uses the oral storytelling method steeped in Indian history, religious tales and folk-narratives in order to relate the past. Achakka highlights the importance of the deities, especially Kenchamma, that shows the significance of tradition and culture and at the same time welcoming modernity and change. Kanthapura is a traditional caste-ridden village which is far away from all modern ways of living and development taking place in the cities. It is believed that the village is protected by the blessings of the deity Kenchamma. Moorthy is the protagonist of the novel who is a Brahmin. As the novel progresses, we find Gandhi entering the mythical framework and most interestingly, Gandhian principles spread among villagers through Harikathas narrated by Jayaramachar. It was through those Harikathas that a spirit of nationalism was evoked among villagers, when the story and birth of Gandhi was narrated simultaneously with that of Shiva and Krishna: “But the Harikatha he did, which I can never forget in this life and in all lives to come, is about the birth of Gandhiji” (20). Gandhi’s protest thus was compared to Krishna’s battle, “So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country” (22). Moorthy, as a devoted follower of Gandhi, goes to every house to collect funds for the Harikathas.

Gandhi’s campaign for the elimination of untouchability in the village comes as a shock for the religious sensibility of the villages. Achakka, the narrator of the story, describes her reaction when comes to know about Moorthy’s visit to Pariah quarters, “I closed my ears when I heard he went to pariah quarter. We said to ourselves, he is one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste, nor clan nor family” (19). Moorthy knows well that the only way to reach to minds and hearts of his village men is through religion. So he arranges religious gatherings at the Kanthapurishwary temple, which is the centre of the village. Jayaramachar is the one who had “done harikathas even before the mahatma” (20).

It is through Harikathas that the past and present are compared with contemporary events and issues and are then connected with Puranic Gods and epic heroes and heroines. To clarify Gandhian ideology the Harikatha narrators quote examples from the mythological stories of Shiva and Parvathi, “Siva is the three eyed,” and “Swaraj too is three eyed: self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, khaddar” (20). Villagers imagine Gandhi as someone who is born with the aim to, “kill the serpent of the foreign rule” (22). As for the villagers, Gandhi becomes the synonym of traditional Hindu awareness, “Don’t be attached to riches, says he, for riches create attachment and attachment hides the face of truth” (22). Moorthy tries to infuse patriotism into the mind of the ignorant Kanthapurians through bhajans and Harikathas. His efforts prove to be useful when some of the villagers start rejecting foreign clothes. To involve the villagers in the Swadesi movement, he also distributes spinning wheels among them. Once the followers of Gandhi are successful in convincing the villagers about Gandhi’s aim for the economic upliftment of the common people, “They would spin and spin, if that Brahmin boy was to be believed, they would have clothes to wear, They said it was all of the Mahatma” (33).

Mahatma Gandhi is represented as an incarnation whose purpose is to liberate India from clutches of slavery. P. Dayal in his book *Raja Rao - A Study of his Novels* observes: “the novelist elevates the Gandhian movement to a mythological plane” (10). Raja Rao within this framework raises the issue of untouchability in the novel. For the majority of the Hindus, the news of the opening of the temples to Pariahs bring in several serious consequences. Moorthy discovers a half-buried linga from the village and installs it. Here, Moorthy as an agent of Gandhian ideas in Kanthapura follows Gandhi in high spirits. Gandhi was Moorthy’s inspiration and mentor. Searching for the path in life, as asks Gandhi, “I am ignorant, how can I seek truth” (53), and Gandhi’s suggestion transformed Moorthy completely: “he threw his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire, and walked out, a Gandhi’s man” (54). He started wearing khadi clothes and fights against untouchability by allowing temple visit to everyone regardless of their caste but has to face displeasure from his own mother. Moorthy’s widowed mother commits suicide and in this difficult situation Gandhi’s words help him to regain the truth of life, “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” (52-3). He weeps and mourns his mother’s death, but ultimately recovers from this misfortune.

After this incident, an educated widow Rangamma becomes a close confidante of Moorthy and takes an active part in the Indian struggle for freedom. Moorthy’s belief in Gandhian philosophy can be seen when Bade Khan resists Moorthy’s entry into the estate and hits him. This action is not tolerated by the women – Rachanna and Madanna, and they fall on Bade Khan and snatch the lathi from him and want to retaliate, but Moorthy cries out, “No beating, sisters, No beatings, in the name of Mahatma” (88). He does not want to react in this situation following the principles of non-violence. He continues his fight against injustice and inequality by following Gandhism.

Moorthy leads the villagers as the representative of Gandhian philosophy. He gets arrested because of his participation in the struggle for India’s independence, and when Rangamma tries to release him on bail, he refuses. When Moorthy is in prison, the women of Kanthapura take charge of the struggle for freedom. Rangamma is a true Gandhian who is not only courageous but also becomes an inspiration for other women. She tells the village women about Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu, and other great historical women of India and encourages them to follow the principles of ‘Truth’ and ‘Non-violence’ and the significance of the ‘Swadeshi’ movement. The people of Kanthapura begin to develop firm faith in the Gandhian principles and movement. Gandhi is not presented as a person anywhere, but he lives in the hearts of the villagers. His speeches and teachings are the words of God for them.

Moorthy comes out as a leader for this small village following the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi. He becomes the symbol of change. Influenced by Moorthy, the people of Kanthapura are filled with the spirit of satyagraha and want to take part in Dandi March. However, Gandhi is arrested by the British government at this juncture and all the responsibilities of the movement fall upon the shoulders of the local leaders. Moorthy plans to start a non-cooperation movement in the village. As a follower of Gandhi, Moorthy visits the homes of untouchables and takes meals with them just like Mahatma did. Moorthy also

shares Gandhi's social philosophy as he, like Gandhi, abstains from materialistic pleasures and remains unmarried. Living a simple and austere life, Moorthy comes out as the Mahatma in the novel.

To conclude, it may be said that in *Kanthapura*, Gandhi's impact conveyed through Moorthy does transform 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*, as stated by Meenakshi Mukerjee in *The Twice Born Fiction*, "the impact of Gandhi transmitted through Bharti changes the whole life of Sriram, bringing him out of the swung somnolence of pampered adolescence" (40). R. K. Narayan expresses the political drive of India's struggle of Independence from a humanist's perspective.

It is undoubtedly the result of Gandhian thought which had helped both the writers to analyse the past and connect it to the future. These novelists had more clarity about western ideology, and it is the Gandhian consciousness which helped them to connect with the contemporary society, the people and to realise their problems, specifically untouchability and the caste system. The writers of that time were deeply influenced by Gandhi as the latter had carefully blended his ideas on Hinduism with nationhood which he had imbibed from Western thought.

R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao are among the significant figures of early Indian English Literature. They had analysed in their works the influence of Gandhian philosophy on Indian culture and ethics. Gandhi put in focused efforts to eliminate poverty, castism, untouchability and superstitions prevailing in the Indian society. *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *Kanthapura* follow Gandhian ideology and his principles of non-violence, truth, brotherhood, satyagraha and his views on untouchability. *Waiting for the Mahatma* portrays Gandhi as a great leader who struggles to resolve the problems of ordinary people and at the same time, *Kanthapura* shows the influence of Gandhi's struggle for India's Independence on the common people living in the remotest parts of the country.

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