The three novels, namely, *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952) and *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) fall in, what I have chosen to call, the transition period. Of course, the best representative woman character of this period is Bharati of *Waiting for the Mahatma*, but I propose to take up the discussion of these three novels in their chronological order.

**Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi**

*Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi* is yet another novel of R. K. Narayan in which women characters have only a secondary and indirect role to play. The story’s main character is Sampath, a versatile personality, who jumps from the business of printing to film production, only to invite his ruin by losing his wits in the mire of his lust for Shanti, the heroine of his first film under production, which is never completed. There is, however, another, equally important, character, that of Srinivas, a philosophically orientated young man, highly dissatisfied with almost everything around him, but generally taking up a charitable benignant and stoical attitude.

The most important among the female characters is Shanti who, apart from ruining Sampath, also unknowingly becomes the cause of total collapse of Ravi’s life, who is terribly in love with her, an absolutely one-sided love which ultimately shatters his mental balance.

In this novel Narayan employs a unique method of projecting an important character wherein the character, Shanti, hardly ever is presented directly by the author as he does the other characters; it is these other
characters who present her to the reader who thus gets a piecemeal picture of her from which he has to construct her whole portrait. M. K. Naik’s comment in this regard is quite significant:

Even Shanti, infatuation for whom drives Ravi almost mad, appears to be an extremely sketchy figure. It is highly significant that we seldom meet her face to face throughout the entire narrative and what she does is mostly reported, even in the crucial episode where she runs away from Sampath.  

Ravi is a bank clerk and a neighbour of Srinivas who is the publisher of the weekly “The Banner”, which is printed at Sampath’s press. Shanti enters first into Ravi’s imagination as an unknown girl whom he had seen years ago at the temple and who had after a few months suddenly disappeared. According to what Ravi tells Srinivas, he saw a girl some years ago, when he was a college student, “coming out of Iswara’s temple ... suddenly, as in a vision; she stood framed on the threshold of the temple; ... so tall and slender. I [Ravi] don’t know how to describe ... I stood arrested on the spot.”  

Ravi makes thereafter a habit of following her daily from the temple up to her home; he also starts making an oil portrait of her at home but never completes it because he “suddenly lost sight of her.” Ravi draws a pencil sketch of the girl for Srinivas which impresses Srinivas so much as to make him “breathless”, and gazing at it he exclaims “I almost feel like returning the smile on her lips!” (SPM,40). Ravi never learns the girl’s name or other details and how or where she suddenly evaporated, but pines for her, after losing her, to an extreme extent. When he sees the real Shanti, brought by Sampath as the heroine of his film, he is cocksure she is the girl of his dreams, but Sampath maintains that Shanti is coming from Madras, visiting Malgudi for the first time in her life.

Sampath is a crafty man. When he first introduces Shanti to Srinivas he describes her as his cousin, a pure bluff! She is in fact one of the applicants for job in the “Sunrise Pictures”. It is the similarity of the snapshot on the application and the sketch drawn by Ravi which makes Sampath
decide, on an impulse, to invite her for a test for the role of Parvati in the film. The same Sampath, when he was first shown the sketch by Srinivas, had commented about Ravi: “What a fool to be running after an unknown girl – a man must shut his eyes tight if it proves useless to look any longer. That’s my principle in life” (SPM,58). True to his principle, he decides to run after the girl when she is no longer “unknown”, materializes herself before him as an applicant for a job in his company! Of course, to Srinivas’ question: “You are his [Sampath’s] cousin, I hear?”, Shanti non-committally replies: “I didn’t know that when I applied” (SPM,140). It is quite clear that before they met Shanti and Sampath did not know each other at all; otherwise Sampath would have recognized her as his cousin either from the sketch drawn by Ravi or from the snapshot accompanying her application and would have announced it to Srinivas. His later claim of Shanti being his cousin and still later Shanti’s indirect support to this claim seem purposeless, and even senseless, in the absence of any apparent advantage desired by them, or either of them, from the declaration of such relationship between them. It is also pertinent that Sampath’s wife reveals to Srinivas’ wife that Sampath and Shanti are of different castes (SPM,177).

Meanwhile, that is, before Shanti’s physical appearance at Malgudi and coming to Ravi’s notice, Ravi bears the pangs of love which only Srinivas understands:

Srinivas knew what silent suffering was going on within that shabby frame. He knew that an inspiration had gone out of his [Ravi’s] life. He had no doubt a home, mother, and brothers and sisters, but all that signified nothing. His heart was not there, any more than it was in the bank. ... he came there [to Srinivas’ office] only in the hope of news about his lost love; (SPM,44).

While Srinivas is very sympathetic to Ravi, Sampath makes a mockery of his feelings as mentioned earlier, and the beauty of it all is that the girl involved, Shanti, is blissfully and totally ignorant of the feelings of all the three!
Factually, we learn very little about Shanti, except that she was born and brought up in Madras, that she married a forest officer, that they had to separate and then she became a widow; all these bare facts coming to us through Sampath only. When she is introduced to Srinivas, he sees before him:

a very pretty girl, of a height which you wouldn't notice either as too much or too little, a perfect figure, rosy complexion, and arched eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes — everything that should send a man, especially an artist, into hysterics. ... She seemed to have donned her personality, part by part, with infinite care” (SPM, 139).

On seeing her, Srinivas feels her enchantment growing upon him, and has to pull himself up, because he finds himself growing poetic. We find in the story that of the three main male characters, Srinivas, Sampath and Ravi, Srinivas is the only one who keeps himself safe and unaffected by the charms of Shanti. The other two are so much captivated that one, Sampath, a man with wife and children, decides to marry her, while the other, Ravi, goes into such uncontrolled and uncontrollable emotion that he becomes totally insane. Of course, in the case of Ravi, it is only he who is to be blamed for his own plight, because Shanti does not even know Ravi, leave alone knowing about his love for her. And if we believe Sampath, Shanti is not really the girl of Ravi’s dreams, whom he had met and lost years ago. But it is not clear why she tolerates, or perhaps invites too, Sampath’s attentions.

There is a great difference between the characters of Sampath and Ravi, and though Sampath is perhaps as much infatuated as Ravi is with Shanti, he does not lose his sanity. On the contrary, he carefully plans to marry her and to set up a second home for himself with her. But one cannot hide one’s infatuation for another woman from one’s wife for long. And Kamala, Sampath’s wife, having noticed it, narrates it to Srinivas’ wife, perhaps in the hope of getting Srinivas’ help. Kamala here represents the helplessness and pitiable condition of an Indian wife against the waywardness.
of her husband. A woman during her long married life bears five children and then suddenly finds it endangered by the entry of another woman, and yet she has no recourse except to weep which Srinivas’ wife reports thus: “The poor girl has been crying for days now. You have got to do something about her” (SPM,177). And when Srinivas broaches the subject with Sampath, he too has to do it “gently, apologetically”. Sampath, on the other hand, as if he has done nothing wrong, at first pooh-poohs the entire story, but even when he admits it he is mischievous, irresponsible, shameless, and says:

Some people say that every sane man needs two wives – a perfect one for the house and a perfect one outside for social life ... I have the one. Why not the other? I have confidence that I will keep both of them happy and if necessary in separate houses. Is a man’s heart so narrow that it cannot accommodate more than one? I have married according to Vedic rites: let me have one according to the civil marriage law. ... (SPM,179).

When Srinivas urges: “Think of your wife”, his response is: “Oh, these women will make a scene. She will be all right. She must get used to it.” He makes it quite clear that this is even today a male dominated world. He even adds: “I’m doing nothing illegal, to feel apologetic. After all, our religion permits us to marry many wives” (SPM,180).

A peculiar and condemnable male outlook is also revealed here by Sampath, namely, that two women as wives of the same person can and should live as friends. When Srinivas bluntly tells him: “...I’m convinced that you are merely succumbing to a little piece of georgette, powder and curves. You have no right to cause any unhappiness to your wife and children” (SPM,180). Sampath with pretence of humility, but in reality vaingloriously replies:

Well, sir, ... Here goes my solemn declaration that my wife and children shall lack nothing in life, either in affection or comfort. Will this satisfy you? If I buy Shanti a car, my wife shall have another; if I give her a house, I will give the other also
a house; it will really be a little expensive duplicating everything this way, but I won't mind it. Later on, when they see how much it is costing me, I'm sure they will bury the hatchet and become friends again. ... (SPM,180).

A member of a society that cannot even in dream think of permitting a woman to have two husbands can brazenly talk in such vein in defence of his intention to have two wives. Clearly 'women's lib' has still a great psychological barrier to cross. A complete overhaul and regeneration of men's minds in regard to women's social status is needed before Sampaths of society can be prevented from thus making light of women's plight. Only drastic educational reforms can achieve the goal.

Ravi's mad rush towards Shanti in the midst of the climactic dance scene of the film "The Burning of Kama", the maiden venture of "Sunrise Pictures", ruins the entire film project and completely frustrates Sampath, who has risked his all in this venture. While the incident sends Ravi to the police lock-up, Sampath who is slightly injured in the melee remarks:

It was an evil hour that brought me and Ravi together. I never knew that a fellow could go so mad. ... It is amazing how much havoc one man could do within an hour. ... More than all this — Shanti. She is so much shaken that she will be unfit for work for many weeks. She swore she would never come near the studio again. ... (SPM,194).

He still pursues her, and under the excuse that "she needs complete rest before she can return to work", he proposes to take her to Mempi Hills. "I'm sure a couple of weeks' stay there will immensely benefit Shanti" (SPM,195). Srinivas rightly mutters in despair: "God alone can rescue him."

When Sampath meets Srinivas again after some period, he is a much sadder man, with "a subdued quality about him" and "an intimidated look in his eyes" (SPM,212). At first he gives out a false account that he got disgusted with Shanti's temperament and "decided to stick to your [Srinivas'] advice" (SPM,214), and therefore saw her off to Madras and came back to
Malgudi. But he eventually comes out with the true story. At the “bleak forest bungalow full of horrible, wide verandas,” (SPM,213) on the hill top, they could stay only for three or four days. The jungle creatures visited the bungalow at night and she trembled with fright and “sat up all night trying to brave it.” But even in her terror “how sweet she was!” Sampath compliments her self-possession saying: “Few women there are in the world who could have helped screaming, under those conditions. You know she was not in the best condition of nerves, …” (SPM,216). Sampath regrets that he and Shanti were not married before going to Mempi. “…we should have gone up to a registrar before leaving for Mempi, …” (SPM,217). Perhaps he suggests that if he could have a chance to consummate marriage with her at Mempi, events would not have taken the turn as they did. “…but she always made some excuse or other and put it [marriage] off. Finally we decided that we were to go through the formality on coming back here [Malgudi]. That was our understanding” (SPM,219). What ultimately happened completely belied his high hopes, because when they came down from the hill and reached Koppal railway station to catch the early morning train the next day, Shanti left Sampath while he was dozing and caught the Madras bound train. She left a note for him which read:

I am sick of this kind of life and marriage frightens me. I want to go and look after my son, who is growing up with strangers. Please leave me alone, and don’t look for me. I want to change my ways of living. You will not find me. If I find you pursuing me, I will shave off my head and fling away my jewellery and wear a white saree. You and people like you will run away at the sight of me. … I had different ideas of a film life (SPM,218).

When she says, “you and people like you”, she gives a stinging lash to Sampath for his lust for her. Also, by her threat to shave off her head, etc., she emphasizes the regrettable fact that a man gives primary importance to a woman’s beauty only, disregarding or underrating all her other qualities or virtues. She makes it quite clear that when she loses her beauty, Sampath and
people like him will run away from her. There is another severe rebuke contained in the note for Sampath because she says: "I am sick of this kind of life" and "I had different ideas of a film life". Obviously she is unhappy about the treatment she has received as the prospective heroine of the film "The Burning of Kama", but more than that she is tired of her entanglement with Sampath, and frees herself from it before it is too late.

Here a slight acquaintance with Rosie of The Guide will show how Shanti resembles her in temperament, habits and behaviour. Shanti presumably uses Sampath to make her career as a film actress, while Rosie uses Raju to make her career as a dancer. One cannot say with any assurance how far Shanti would have gone with Sampath, had events not taken an ugly turn on account of Ravi. Rosie of course does go far with Raju, leaving her husband, and would presumable have continued with Raju indefinitely, had Raju not forged her signature and gone to jail. Even then she continues her dancing career only, and does not return to her husband. Shanti is of course a widow and she would therefore not have suffered the qualm of leaving her husband had she decided to marry Sampath, but she would then have to abandon her son, "growing up with strangers." One can call it her luck that Ravi's rash action so upsets her that she changes the course of her life and takes a U-turn. Thus basically there seems little difference in the characters of these two heroines.

The other three women characters in the novel are all wives primarily. Their roles as mothers are nondescript. They are Srinivas' and Sampath's wives, and Ravi's mother. Among them only Srinivas' wife, though she plays no important role in the flow of the novel, shows some noteworthy characteristics. The other two are very meek and obedient traditional wives without a trace of individuality. Significantly, however, Narayan has eulogized wives in a single sentence, when he says in reference to the owner of the house where Srinivas is a tenant: "He had led a happy family life in this house till the death of his wife, when the family scattered and disrupted" (SPM,7). The pivotal role of a woman in exercising a sort of a
gravitational pull holding all the members of the family together could not perhaps have so pithily been better expressed than this. There is one more comment to stress the importance of the wife in the family, namely: “It seemed to have excited the entire community that Srinivas’ wife had arrived. Everybody seemed relieved to see Srinivas’ home-life return to a normal shape” (SPM,36).

Srinivas’ wife – we don’t find her name throughout the novel – has been “brought up in a very orthodox manner in her little village”. She can’t eat hotel food, she “can’t eat any food without a bathe first. It’d be unthinkable” (SPM,34). And so she fasts for two days during her journey when she comes to Malgudi from her village. She is a woman governed mostly by public opinion, so much so that one wonders whether she has any independent views of her own. Even her rushing to Malgudi without knowing Srinivas’ home address or whether he has any home at all is motivated more by the fact that Srinivas’ neglect made her “the laughing-stock of our entire village” (SPM,33) than her desire to be with her husband. She does not allow Srinivas to go out for coffee because “What will people say if they find the master of the house going out for coffee? ... Don’t you see, people will think it odd?” (SPM,37). She does not want him to go out early in the day, lest it should upset the neighbours; she doesn’t want to raise her own voice in her own house, “lest the neighbours should think of her as a termagant”, and so on. Naturally, Srinivas feels that ‘a whole civilization had come to an abrupt stalemate because its men had no better basis of living than public opinion.’ He also thinks:

His wife as a child must have pleased her grandmother by her behaviour, and been rewarded for it. A child’s life was reduced to a mere approved behaviour in the midst of father, mother, grandmother and uncles; and later in life parents-in-law, husband, and so on and on endlessly till one had no opportunity to think of one’s own views on any matter, till it grew into a mania as in his wife (SPM,37).
She is happy if she can feed her husband well and, of course, like most Indian wives, does not eat unless she has fed him first. She is so orthodox she can't go out for shopping unescorted. She is literate enough to read "obscure" novels, but finds nothing of interest in "Banner", the journal published by her husband. She is, however, a very sensitive woman and cannot "put up with ... imperiousness or an authoritarian tone in others." Everybody, including Srinivas and his mother, respects her sensitiveness. "His domestic life seemed to have nearly come to an end each time" when on "one or two minor occasions he had seemed to give her orders". In this regard she is very different from Sampath's wife or Ravi's mother. At the same time, she cares so much for her husband and is so anxious for his safety, that when Srinivas does not return home till after 4 a.m., she goes out boldly in search of him in the dead of night without thinking of her own safety. She also possesses capacity to tender proper advice to Srinivas as when he thinks of returning the monetary help extended by his brother – of course, on his demand for his share in the ancestral property – on the flimsy ground of his brother's warning: "You will understand that ancestral property is after all a sacred trust, and not loose money meant for the fanciful expenditure of the individual; it really belongs to our children and their children" (SPM,199). Srinivas feels that his brother "blesses with his hand, and kicks with his feet." But his wife cools him down with: "He has merely said that you must be careful with the money. Why should that make you angry?" Srinivas himself too occasionally seeks her advice. When his landlord dies and the landlord's son-in-law comes to collect rent, Srinivas obtains her concurrence before paying him.

Srinivas keeps himself so much absorbed in his work that at moments of leisure he realizes that he is responsible for his wife's "lonely, bare life." He ponders:

I have neglected her lately. It seems ages since I touched her, for when all is said and done a husband-wife relationship is peculiar to itself, being the most tactile of all human relationships.
Perhaps she is wilting away without the caress and the silly idiom softly whispered in the ear (SPM,48). Yet his wife makes no grievance of his behaviour. “She had accommodated herself to his habits fairly well ... without much grumbling” (SPM,46).

It is Ravi’s entry into Srinivas’ home as an insane that stirs Srinivas’ wife out of her passivity and docility. Incidentally Ravi’s father is a funny character. He was a flourishing lawyer when Ravi was a student in a college, but was suddenly stricken with paralysis and became completely invalid and also blind. But even in such wretched condition he behaves insultingly with his wife and she bears his insults without demur. He is arrogant and rough with Srinivas also, though the latter does so much to help Ravi and his whole family. He complains: “He [Srinivas] ruined my son by putting notions into his head. Now he wants to ruin the rest of the family” (SPM,203). It is this ungratefulness, which prompts Srinivas’ wife to protest, but the pitiable plight of the family moves her and she willingly starts helping them actively – so much so that she takes an independent decision to arrange exorcising Ravi by a magician, as Ravi’s mother thinks he is possessed.

Ravi’s mother gives us a picture of tolerance and silent suffering. She is aware that her husband is “so unreasonable and difficult to manage”. When she proposes to take Ravi to the temple at Sailam for cure on the advice of the exorcist her husband’s reaction is typical of his temperament:

Why should she go? With whose permission is she leaving the town and travelling? What brazenness has come over our women! ... Is there no one to whom she will listen? ... She is disobeying me. ... No man who has been in prison can be our son. Why should she trouble about him [Ravi]? If she is my wife let her give him up. ... (SPM,210).

Srinivas cannot help reflecting: “How much must she have stood from him for forty years” (SPM,211), and thus admires her fortitude.

Sampath’s wife, Kamala, is almost a nonentity in the novel, and appears personally on the scene only once when Srinivas visits Sampath’s
home. She is “a frail person of about thirty-five, neither good-looking nor bad-looking, very short, …” (SPM,85), shy, nervous and fidgety. She is so ineffective that she is incapable of voicing her greatest woe to Srinivas directly. She tells his wife about Sampath’s plan of marrying Shanti and thus ruining her. Apart from thus indirectly seeking Srinivas’ help, she takes no steps of her own to protest against or prevent the bigamy. She disappears from the novel completely.

While Shiv K. Gilra, commenting on Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi says that with it, “Narayan’s art as a novelist delves deeper into the complexities of human relationships and circumstances.” M. K. Naik describes the same novel as “as schizophrenic a work as The English Teacher” (Naik, Ironic Vision,30). Gilra obviously is nearer truth. Also, to classify The English Teacher, which is mostly autobiographical, as schizophrenic seems doing injustice not only to the novel but also to its author.

On the whole, the women characters in this novel are indicative of a shift in their social positions. Though the shift may seem almost insignificant it does herald a transition period, from silent sufferers of tyranny to a semblance of recognition for women. Shanti and her husband separate, before she becomes a widow. To be able to separate instead of carrying on an unmanageable relationship is in itself an achievement for that period. Then, in spite of her widowhood, and entrusting the care of her son to ‘strangers’, she accepts a job in Sampath’s proposed film. Of course, she is unaware of the evils of the film world, and when she realizes them, she leaves not only that world, but also Sampath, to return to her son to look after him. All her decisions and actions reveal a boldness that is unthinkable for a woman of a few decades ago. Srinivas’ wife also is not a sufferer from her husband’s tyranny. What she suffers is not due to his tyrannies but to his circumstances. In fact, he is quite sympathetic to her, anxious to make her happy as far as possible, and no traditions cast their evil shadow on their relationship. It is also noteworthy that she exhibits a capacity to undertake an adventure of travelling from her village to Malgudi to meet her husband and live with him.
after a long separation, without having his home address or knowing whether he has a home at all. She doesn’t wait for receiving his permission for the purpose. Ravi’s mother too, though she does suffer from her husband’s ill treatment of her, is a victim, not of traditions so much as of her husband’s temper which is equally resentful towards his son, Ravi. Even Srinivas has a taste of his cruel nature. The only exception is of Sampath’s wife, Kamala. Shantha Krishnaswamy describes their relationship pithily: “Sampath... takes his domestic drudge of a wife for granted. He has no qualms about his flirtation with Shanta, ... he justifies his liaison with great aplomb...” (Krishnaswamy,118).

**The Financial Expert**

Faced with two opposing pulls, love for the son and greed for wealth, the dominant character of the novel, Margayya, is able to save neither, his son completely ruined, his wealth totally evaporated. This is the simplistic story in a nutshell of *The Financial Expert*.

R. S. Singh appropriately comments:

Both Sampath [of *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi*] and Margayya were victims of high ambitions and over-confidence without adequate corresponding abilities. Sampath was so bogged down in indecision that “the question of career seemed to him as embarrassing as a physiological detail”. ... He wanted to achieve something big something unusual so that he could get rid of “engaging all his hours in trivial round of actions, at home and outside”. Similar were the feelings of Margayya, who, in a bid to become a lakhier in no time, started collecting money from people on high interest. But he failed to continue in this business for long. They were both average men who aspired to touch the sky in a jump and in the process crashed
to the same old ground. Therefore both novels are set in an atmosphere of unreality. 4

Shiv K. Gilra has very beautifully commented:
Margayya – ‘one who showed the way’ – loses his own way in the wilderness of materialism” (Gilra,40).

As is the general trend in several of Narayan’s novels and stories, *The Financial Expert* too is a male dominated narrative wherein Margayya and his son play major roles. The third, Dr. Pal, is the villain, the evil that brings tragedy in Margayya’s life.

There are only two women characters of any importance in the novel, Margayya’s wife and his daughter-in-law, but both play only secondary roles and neither has any impact on the development or the twists and turns of the story. The wife, Meenakshi, exercises little or no influence over her husband. The only time Margayya seems to have ‘acted upon’ his wife’s ‘advice’ is when she laughs aloud at seeing him holding the paper at arm’s length while reading and says: “Why don’t you buy a pair of glasses like other young men of your age? Otherwise you will sprain your hand.” 5 The miser that he is, he obtains a pair of glasses ‘mounted in silver’, ‘on trial’ (FE.5), without payment and then never remembers to pay.

Match-making in several of Narayan’s novels is done in a traditional style, through examination of the horoscopes of the prospective bride and groom and after settlement of the dowry, and Margayya’s marriage is no exception. It is not love which has united him with Meenakshi. Also. doubtless his first love is money and second his child, and yet he too has his moments of romantic reminiscence, as he has when he searches and finds his horoscope. He feels “a sudden tenderness for his wife” who seems to him to have become “all at once a young bashful virgin bride”, and he addresses her as ‘Meena’ (FE.54).

A second such amorous exhibition occurs when Meenakshi, eager to know what Margayya has brought home in a bundle, comes to him after finishing her day’s work, ‘with an endearing smile’ and sits beside him:
He put his arm around her and drew her nearer, ... She nestled close to him. It was as if they had thrown off twenty years and were back in the bridal chamber. He said: “Why don’t you buy flowers regularly? I see that you don’t care for them nowadays.”

“I am an old woman, flowers and such things _”

“But this old man likes to see some flowers in this old lady’s hair,” he said. They laughed and felt very happy (FE,92).

Barring such rare outbursts of romantic moods, Margayya has not much regard for his wife. Even when she has tidied herself up in the evening after the day’s work, he thinks she looks ‘plebeian’, “with her faded jacket, her patched, discoloured saree and her anaemic eyes”, and he reflects: “How can anyone treat me respectfully when my wife is so indifferent-looking?” (FE,20). He fails to realize at the moment that it is not her fault, but the result of his failure to provide her with enough good clothes and substantial nourishing food. But when in a reflective mood, he does think: “If I have money, ... I could give those medicines to my wife. The doctor would look at her with more interest, and she might look like other women. ...” (FE,29). He realizes his immediate need to acquire money; he thinks: “People did anything for money. Money was men’s greatest need, like air or food.”, and “It left him admiring the power and dynamism of money, its capacity to make people do strange deeds” (FE,28).

The various opinions Margayya expresses at various times on women, reveal enough of his low estimate of women in general and of his wife in particular; to wit:

“If women got on smoothly ...” Half the trouble in this world is due to women who cannot tolerate each other (FE,23).

You’ll [Meenakshi] see what I’ll do to that little monkey [their child, Balu], that devil you have begotten (FE,40).

Women can’t hold their tongues, ... (FE,53).

She [Meenakshi] has completely spoilt him [Balu], beyond remedy; I must take him out of her hands ... (FE,53).
Seems to be bent upon worrying me – she’s [Meenakshi] getting queer! (FE,53).

Dowry is a recurring theme in Narayan’s novels. In this novel too it finds its place. Margayya first describes it as a cause for the ruin of his father’s prosperity. He tells his borrowers:

“... Three daughters were born to my father. Five cart-loads of paddy came to us every half year, from the fields. We just heaped them up on the floor of the hall, we had five halls to our house; but where has it all gone? To the three daughters. By the time my father found husbands for them there was nothing left for us to eat at home!”

“But is it not said that a man who begets a son is blessed in three lives, because he gives away the greatest treasure on earth?” said someone.

“And how much more blessed is he that gives away three daughters? He is blessed no doubt, but he also becomes a bankrupt,” Margayya said (FE,6-7).

The same Margayya can, however, reverse his view while thinking of getting dowry for his son. When his ‘mind gloated over visions of his son’, while the son is still a child, he dreams that his son could go to America and obtain degrees, and then marry perhaps a judge’s daughter. His [Margayya's] own wife might demand all the dowry she wanted. He would not interfere, leaving it for the women to manage as they liked (FE,29).

The author has here made pointed reference to the fact that in the upholding and spread of the evil of the dowry system, women are more interested than men, though obviously the sufferers of the evil are women only.

When the actual occasion for marrying his son, Balu, approaches, Margayya starts the usual procedure of matching the horoscopes of prospective brides with that of his son, but ultimately manoeuvres, through the
power of his money, to get an astrologer to re-arrange the stars of Balu so that his horoscope matched perfectly with that of the girl of Margayya’s choice. Margayya’s chief consideration in selecting her (Brinda) is that her father owns a tea-estate in Mempi Hills, which yields an annual income of ten thousand rupees.

Narayan here deftly hints at one of the major obstacles in the eradication of the evil of dowry system, namely, those who announce their opposition to the system when they are obliged to give dowry, themselves demand it in one form or another when opportunity arises.

The couple have got their only child rather late in life, when Margayya is thirty-seven, after so many prayers and promising the gods the child’s weight in silver rupees if one should be born. The mother does not react to this late gift abnormally, but the father gets over-fond of the child, Balu, which results in the child getting completely spoilt. A significant remark of Margayya’s sister-in-law, staying ‘on the other side of the wall’, on hearing the child’s ‘angry shout’ is: “This is the worst of begetting sons late in life! They pet them and spoil them and make them little monsters” (FE,13). The author’s own comment on it: “The lady … could well say this because she was the mother of ten.”

The extent of the child’s indiscipline can be gauged sufficiently from two incidents. First, when Margayya is examining the accounts at home, Balu comes demanding immediate purchase of a toy-elephant for him, and on being asked to go away, he kicks away Margayya’s register in irritation; the ink-well is upset. Not satisfied with this much, the child stamps his heel on the spilt ink, which spoils the entire book and also splashes over Margayya’s face. When Margayya cries excitedly to his wife: “Look what he has done, this monkey!”, the boy cries back: “you are a monkey!”

The second, a sequel to the above, is the boy’s throwing away in the gutter Margayya’s precious red note book in which he has been maintaining a record of his money transactions with the villagers.
Margayya and Meenakshi do not carry on smoothly. They have their differences on every matter, big and small. Margayya discusses this problem seriously with his wife one day: “Do you know why we get on each other’s nerves and quarrel?” And he narrates to her his quarrel with the secretary of the bank during the day. When Meenakshi asks: “… What right has he [the secretary] to threaten you?” He replies: “He has every right because he has more money, authority, dress, looks – above all, more money. It’s money which gives people all this. Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in our purse” (FE,21).

In a puffed up mood he adds reflectively:

Even you will learn to behave with me when I have money. Your rudeness now is understandable. For isn’t there a famous saying: ‘He that hath not is spumed even by his wife; even the mother that bore him spurns him’? (FE,22).

But the bickers between them are constant, and mostly over the child, each blaming the other for the child’s delinquency. In his lean days, when he has no income and his savings almost exhausted,

If he stayed at home, it invariably resulted in some clash with his wife, for his son misbehaved so much in his presence that either he or his wife felt impelled to chastize him, and each vehemently protested when the other did it. And then all kinds of controversies started between him and his wife (FE,74).

It is a trait in Narayan’s writings that when he draws a picture of poverty, he generally depicts strife and misery as its consequences, as seen in the earlier part of this novel. The same fact is noticeable in a few of his short stories, namely, “Wife’s Holiday”, “The Edge”, “A Horse and Two Goats” and others. Of course, Narayan generally dwells in his novels and stories on the lives of middle class families that are, though not rich, sufficiently comfortable financially to meet their wants.
Meenakshi no doubt loves her child, but finds it rather too difficult to manage him with all his childish frolics, together with an unmanageable husband to tend to. Her general complaint is: “It’s impossible to manage him [the child] during the afternoons. He constantly runs out of the house into the street. I don’t have a moment’s peace or rest”. But Margayya snubs her: “Don’t get cantankerous about such a small child”. The wife, not deterred by the snub, retorts: “Yes, I wish you could stay at home and look after him instead of coming in the evening and dandling him for a moment after he has exhausted all his tricks”. Her husband’s reply, however, is typical: “Yes, gladly, provided you agree to go out and arrange loans for all those village idiots” (FE,12).

It is rather funny how a wife is “somewhat taken aback”, by a mere change in the dress of her husband and, of course, when he talks “like a man who has just arrived from a far-off land” and speaks with “detachment and superiority”, without, in fact, having any material qualitative change. When Margayya dresses gaudily and exhibits these traits, Meenakshi reacts surprisingly subdued; she treats him “with the utmost consideration when she served him his frugal meal ... served him quietly, with a sort of docile agreeableness,” and after meals, “she gave him a few scented nuts and a betel leaf and saw him off at the door as he went down the street” (FE,24). Quite an impression a husband can create in this manner, on his wife, according to the author.

The traditional wife in Meenakshi, full of loyalty for her husband, makes her wait for him even when he comes home late. Even before he can make up his mind whether to knock on the door or not, “his wife threw back the bolt and let him in.” and her loyalty notwithstanding, she is sour and asks: “What have you been doing so late?” But traditionality operates on the husband too, and though a lamb outside, “inside his home all his old assertiveness returned. He was the master of his house, with nobody to question him. He ignored her ...” The husband’s ego in him also makes him feel pleased to find his wife waiting for him without having her dinner. And he
is "arrogant" too, when his wife simply suggests: "... In future if you are going to be late _ ", meaning he may inform beforehand to avoid her worrying. But he retorts: "I must ask your permission, I suppose." Such are indeed inconsiderate husbands in abundance in India (FE,37).

Narayan has well brought out an important trait of Meenakshi, which no doubt majority of wives exhibit, and about which, of course, the husbands are aware, as Margayya is. If they are not, they run the danger of destroying domestic happiness. When the priest detains Margayya at the temple, he is worried about getting home late. He reflects:

His wife might once again start a lot of bother and pull a long face and think he'd been visiting a brothel. "Funny creature, so jealous at my age! I can tell her I've been out on important business. What makes her think I have sweethearts!" ... "Who'd consent to be a sweetheart to me! A fellow with the name 'Margayya', which seems almost a branding with hot iron" (FE,48).

And the author adds:

Ever since he [Margayya] could remember she had had always shown a sort of uneasiness about Margayya. ... He remembered how a year or so ago she raised quite a lot of bother when he mentioned that a woman had come to him as a client under the tree. She looked sullen for two days until he convinced her that he had only been joking (FE,48-49).

Husbands do, of course, normally be wary of giving any opportunity to their wives to suspect their character, and Margayya is no exception. But there are moments when a man is not in his senses or is provoked to such a degree that he throws all caution to the winds. Margayya, when already harassed too much by his child and unable to vent his anger on him for the loss caused by him by throwing away the account book in the gutter, is asked by his wife: "Where is the child?" He replies in anger: "Probably rolling in the gutter." And when his wife innocently asks: "What has come over you? You don't
seem to be in your senses since last night.”, he retorts: “I’m not. And if you try to imply that I have been drinking or spending the night in a brothel, I leave you free to think so _ ” (FE,43). So there is a lesson by Narayan for the wives also: Do not provoke your husbands beyond their tolerance level.

Meenakshi’s general behaviour as wife is such as to satisfy the male ego in Margayya. When he undertakes a forty-day Lakshmi puja as advised by the priest, she “got up at five and prepared the jaggery-sweetened rice which had to be offered to the Goddess.” At such services rendered by her, Margayya “was gratified at the thought of his wife’s obedience. ‘She is quite accommodating,’ he reflected” (FE,70). But his male ego gets sometimes hurt, even when the wife’s behaviour is blameless. When he suggests that Balu should make another attempt to get through the Matriculation examination, and the boy says: “I will not read again, I have already spoken to mother about it.”, Margayya turns to his wife: “He has spoken to you, has he? What has he said?” This clearly indicates that the boy’s action in speaking to his mother rather than to him has hurt him. But what piques him more is his wife’s failure to report this to him. He therefore asks his wife: “Why didn’t you tell me about it?” And in so asking he is merely “eagerly looking for some lapse on her part to justify him in letting off steam” _ steam that he is unable to let off on his son and which naturally he lets off on the wife. So when she replies: “Because I knew he was going to tell you about it himself”, he ‘burst out at her’: “What do you mean by discussing all sorts of things with the boy and not telling me anything? These are matters _ ” His browbeating his wife would have continued in this strain but for his son’s interruption. (FE,141).

Margayya decides to publish Dr. Pal’s book on “Bed Life” under the title “Domestic Harmony”, just to earn money. When his wife reads the manuscript, her comment expresses her honest and frank opinion: “It seems to be so vulgar! … How can anybody have written about all this? You men have no _ ”. But Margayya’s comment is full of hypocrisy and perversity:

It’s a scientific book. It’s going to bring in a lot of money. …
What’s wrong with it? It’s something going on all over the world
every moment. It’s very important. People should possess correct scientific knowledge, and then all marriages will be happy. I’m going to educate Balu in all these matters the moment he is interested (FE,93).

As the sales start declining, however, and the profits dwindle, he does a complete about-turn:

Book business is no business at all. ... It is a rusty business, ... sales are not as good as they used to be. ... Awful stuff [i.e. the book ‘Domestic Harmony’]. Most vulgar and poisonous. It will do a lot of damage to young minds.

But his wife’s view on it is consistent. So she retorts: “And also to old minds, I think. How can people write brazenly of all those matters?” Margayya’s hypocrisy is complete when he replies:

Did you ever notice how I have managed not to bring a single copy into this house? I don’t want our Balu ever to know that there is such a book. ... I don’t want people to say that Balu enjoys all the money earned through “Domestic Harmony”. I would do anything to avoid it (FE,118).

And Meenakshi expresses ‘deep appreciation of this precaution’.

Balu, as already mentioned, is a completely spoilt child, and when he is sent to school he fails to show any interest in studies, though Margayya performs the admission with much fanfare. Margayya entertains high hopes for his son’s future, even before the son’s schooling starts:

His mind gloated over visions of his son. He would grow into an aristocrat. He would study, not in a Corporation School, but in the convent, and hobnob with the sons of the District Collector or the Superintendent of Police or Mangal Seth, the biggest mill-owner in the town. He would promise him a car all for himself when he came to the College. He could go to America and obtain degrees, and then marry perhaps a judge’s daughter. ... (FE,29).
Margayya spends money even on home tutors. But Balu, reluctant to study, is adept at fooling the tutors. He reaches up to the matriculation class, but fails in the examination twice, despite three home tutors, one for every two subjects.

While the father thus vainly goes on entertaining false aspirations about the son’s educational progress, the mother, Meenakshi, realizes Balu’s apathy towards education. “She had understood long before that the boy was not interested in his studies and that he attached no value to them, but it was no use telling that to her husband” (FE,136).

Notwithstanding her natural simplicity and lack of sophistication, Meenakshi exhibits a native talent to understand both her husband and her son. So when a crisis develops between father and son over the latter’s education, the mother watches silently, with resignation and fear:

She pursued what seemed to her the best policy and allowed events to shape themselves. She knew that matters were coming to a conclusion now and she was a helpless witness to a terrific struggle between two positive-minded men, for she no longer had any doubt that the son was a grown-up man (FE,136).

She is observant and takes decisions which, she thinks, are in the best interest of the family happiness:

The more she saw him [Balu], the more she was reminded of her own father in his younger days; exactly the same features, the same gruffness, and the same severity. ... She saw the same expression on the boy’s face now. The boy’s look was set and grim. His lips were black with cigarettes which she knew he smoked: he often smelt of them when he came home... But she kept this secret knowledge to herself since she didn’t like to set up her husband against him. She understood that the best way to attain some peace of mind in life was to maintain silence; ultimately, she found that things resolved themselves in the best manner possible or fizzled out. She found that it was only speech
which made existence worse every time. Lately, after he had become affluent, she found that her husband showed excessive emphasis, rightly or wrongly, in all matters; she realized that he had come to believe that whatever he did was always right. She did her best not to contradict him: she felt that he strained himself too much in his profession, and that she ought not to add to his burden. So if he sometimes raved over the mismanagement of the household, she just did not try to tell him that it was otherwise. She served him his food silently, and he himself discovered later what was right and what was wrong and confessed it to her. Now more than in any other matter she practiced this principle where their son was concerned (FE, 137).

The above detailed description of what she thinks and what she does shows Meenakshi in an idealistic light as a wife in preserving the happiness of her home, and also as a mother so far as keeping peace between father and son is concerned. But it also shows her failure to provide a mother’s contribution in moulding her son’s character and keeping him on the right path. It is not that she makes absolutely no attempt. In fact, ‘once or twice she attempted to tell the son to be more mindful of his father’s wishes and orders, but he told her to shut up’ (FE, 137-138). It is this failure to have any influence of her motherly love or care on the boy right from his childhood, which leads to his daring to ask her ‘to shut up.’ And then what does she do? “She left him alone. And she left her husband alone. She attained thereby great tranquillity in practical everyday life” (FE, 138). It is this attitude which amounts to her failure, because attaining tranquillity in the household cannot and should not be the mere goal of a woman who has to perform the double function of a wife and a mother. She has to act, putting in the best of her endeavour, to bring about a desirable well-being of both husband and son, even at the cost of a little loss of tranquillity. Another instance wherein she betrays her failure is when they hear about the death of Bahu, who has run away from home, and
she ‘arraigns’ her husband: “It’s all your doing. You ruined him. ... You and your schools! But for your obsession and tyranny _ ” (FE,155-156).

Obviously such blatant accusation of the husband, when he too is full of grief at the loss of his son, and in the presence of a ‘large crowd’, is against all decorum, and Meenakshi, though she too utters these harsh words under great stress of grief, does her husband an injustice. It is like adopting an easy way out to absolve oneself of all blame for what has happened, instead of treating this tragic event as one of common grief and loss for herself and her husband.

As is usual with Narayan, he raises some vital issue or another in his novel and leaves it unanswered, only to be pondered over by the reader. Here the problem(s) which arise(s) is/are: when an offspring does not, or fails to, meet the expectations of one or both the parents, should the parent(s) or society brand him as spoilt? Has the offspring the right to decide for himself/herself whether he/she is being/has been spoilt or not – as Balu seems to do in this novel, when he says: “Mother has not spoilt me, nor anyone else. Why should anyone spoil me?” (FE,139). And more vitally, what are the minimum norms of conduct, etc., which an offspring is expected by society generally to meet. Up to the stage of the story where Balu indulges in the above quoted rhetoric, his major facet of character coming into question is his total lack of any interest in his own education. He himself makes it very clear to his father: “Father, if you hate me and want to make me miserable, you will bother me with examinations and studies. I hate them” (FE,141). The mother reconciles herself to this fact apparently easily enough, but Margayya is unable to bear it for reasons which come out in his utterances: “Every little idiot has passed his S.S.L.C. exam. Are you such a complete fool? ... How am I to hold up my head in public? What will they think of me? What will they say of my son?” (FE,136,138).

And later, when the boy has run away from home, Margayya behaves wildly whenever he is reminded of his son, and declares dramatically: “A boy who has an utter disregard for his father’s feelings is no son. He is a
curse that the Gods have sent down for us. He is not my son” (FE,147). The mother, on the other hand “brooded over her son Balu night and day. She lost the taste for food” (FE,147). When Margayya tells her to buy any clothes she liked, she says: “Tell me about Balu. That is what I need, not clothes” (FE,145). And when he tells her, ‘in his own clumsy manner to make her happy’, “Ask for any money you want.”, she replies: “What shall I do with money? I have no use for it” (FE,146).

It is indeed a very realistic depiction of how the mother and father can hold vitally conflicting view-points on their offspring’s loss, and how much their reactions to the loss can differ. Of course, when news of Balu’s death arrives, both parents break down, and that piteous episode too receives a realistic presentation by the author, though with melodramatic touches.

Like a phoenix, however, Balu rises from his ashes, because the news of his death was false, communicated by a madman from Madras. (That is the name in the novel, though now it is Chennai). The effect of retrieving her son is almost magical on the mother:

His mother, he found, seemed to have become an entirely new person. She looked more youthful. A new flush appeared on her shallow cheeks. Her eyes had become very bright and sparkling. She became loquacious and puckish in her comments. She took the trouble to comb her hair with care and stuck jasmine strings in it. She seemed to feel that she was born anew into the world. She spoke lightheartedly and with a trembling joy in her voice. ... His mother plied him with delicacies all the time. He had only to take a deep breath and look for his mother, and she at once asked: “What do you want, my boy?” (FE,174-175).

“It was a very agreeable situation for all concerned”. that is, for both parents and the son, because the son returns from Madras to Malgudi on Margayya’s promise to leave him alone. So the “father left him alone” and the mother showers all her love and care on him, and the boy “had never thought they attached so much importance to his person. He enjoyed it very much.”
But within six months of such idle life, with nothing to do except to “eat, rest, and grow fat,” “the boy became unrecognizable...” and “Margayya wondered what to do with him”. As is usual and can easily be surmised, Margayya thinks “that the best solution would be to marry him”. And thus a fourth character, Balu’s wife, Brinda, enters.

But she plays an almost passive role. She comes from a rich family. “In her father’s house she has four rooms, all her own”. So the room put up on the terrace by Margayya for Balu & Brinda is “not good enough”; and Meenakshi’s complaint is: “The girl hardly comes out of her room all day. I have to call her a dozen times before she will come downstairs for her meal. ...I’m probably not good enough for a modern girl like her” (FE,190).

Margayya therefore decides to give “one of the houses he had acquired to his son for setting up a family independently” (FE,189), although Meenakshi does not relish this idea. Balu is only eighteen at this time, and Brinda obviously is still younger, and totally inexperienced in running a house on her own. Brinda exhibits the elementary features of Indian culture when she “prostrated at her mother-in-law’s feet before taking leave of her” (FE,191). Barring this little exhibition, however, and Margayya’s opinion to the contrary, who considers her “a very elegant girl” and who thinks: “What a fortunate thing to have secured this daughter-in-law. If those fool astrologers had had their way!” (FE,209), Brinda does not display any bright streak of character. Apparently, she does not help her mother-in-law in household work while in joint family, and it is clear she fails to inspire her husband, towards any better way of life. In fact, he goes from bad to worse, and takes to gambling and other baser evils, under the influence of Dr. Pal, and Brinda suffers silently, failing to report facts to her parents-in-law. Only when things come to a head, Balu demanding his share in property, Margayya investigates. Even then Brinda tries to hide facts from him. In fact, she proves herself to be a weak, timid wife, in line with hundreds of thousands of such other Indian wives. She submits to her worthless husband just because, in her own words: “I’m afraid of him. ... If I speak... he threatens to drive me out...” (FE,210).
She has no spark of resistance to evil, for like an average Indian woman she too feels helpless and totally dependent on the husband for survival. Neither her father’s tea-estate with a yearly income of ten thousand rupees, nor Margayya’s all the wealth – for he was very rich by that time – is of any help to her. Like all other traditional wives she also suffers silently because of her husband’s bad habits. Meena Shirwadkar means more or less the same thing when she says:

Mr. Sampath [SPM], the average husband and father of five daughters, is infatuated with an actress and brushes aside his wife’s suffering with the assertion, “She must get used to it.” Narayan, with remarkable insight, shows the suffering of middle-class wives. Brinda, ... though just married, has to suffer like her own mother-in-law, for Balu, surrounded by giggling girls, does not care for her.

Total submission, even when the husband neglects his wife, is an idea ingrained in the women themselves.  

Thus the women characters show a contrast. Meenakshi is a homely housewife with her attention and activity confined to the four corners of her house. But she is not an oppressed wife, and she is shrewd enough to take her own decisions to maintain peace of her home against “two positive-minded men” (FE,136), and if she chooses to maintain silence, her choice is guided more by tact than by fear. Brinda, on the other hand, though of a later generation, lacks spirit, is a dumb witness to Balu’s degradation and vileness and silently bears the yoke of her suffering.

As in several other of his novels, in this novel too, Narayan has sprinkled Indian myths and legends here and there, and perhaps in a larger doze than in any other of his writing:

The priest of the temple in his street talks of the Puja performed by Markandeya to win over Yama, the God of Death (FE,32-33).

When Margayya refuses the milk offered by the priest to him, the priest says: “Milk is one of the forms of Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of
Wealth. …”(FE,35). He also narrates from the Mahabharata “the story of Kubera, the wealthiest man in creation, who undertook a long arduous penance as atonement for spilling a drop of milk on the floor of his palace” (FE,36). Also the following:

That means you [Margayya] should propitiate Goddess Lakshmi … When she throws a glance and it falls on someone, he becomes rich, … A devotee of Goddess Lakshmi need care for nothing, … It’s only the protégé of Goddess Saraswathi who has to mind such things. But when Saraswathi favours a man, the other Goddess withdraws her favours. There is always a rivalry between the two – between the patronage of the spouse of Vishnu and the spouse of Brahma. … (FE,50).

Do you know that Saturn is the most powerful entity in the world? And if he is gratified he can make you a ruler of this world or he can just drown you in an ocean of misery. Nobody can escape him. Better keep him in good humour (FE,55).

…it reminded her of the story of Gora Kumbar, a potter, who was devoted to the God Vishnu and took no care of his family. At meal times his little son demanded ghee, … The lady went out to borrow ghee... leaving the child in the care of the father, who was stamping on wet clay all the time. When she was gone, he got into a mystic ecstasy and started dancing, and did not notice the child crawling under his feet... and when the mother returned with ghee the child had been stamped into the wet mud. …” (FE,76).

Waiting for the Mahatma

Bharati, the heroine of Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), is the most representative woman character of the transition period. She neither
suffers from the trauma of tradition nor is she yet sufficiently ‘modern’ to be a victim of its vices.

Critics, who have treated *Waiting for the Mahatma* as a political novel, have either praised it as a success or condemned it as a failure. K. K. Sharma and B. K. Johri say that this novel

surveys the Indian political scene before the Independence, that is, it concentrates on the Non-Co-operation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement and the tragedy of the partition. Enough light is thrown on Gandhi’s non-violence and his programme of social uplift. The multi-dimensional hardships that the people suffered with freedom have also been artistically painted. The partition of the country, the mass killing of people on communal basis, search for victims in the train, cruel violence meted out to women, the unfortunate children rendered refugees, Gandhi’s peace-mission, anger of the people finally leading to Bapu’s assassination – all these find superb expression in this novel. 

The same two authors, however, consider Narayan’s portrayal of communal violence as “peculiar”:

There is one thing peculiar about Narayan’s portrayal of communal violence; he focuses his camera only on the eastern regions – viz. on the riots in Naokhali, Bihar and Calcutta. It is surprising that he does not refer to the Punjab that witnessed the most horrid scenes of communal violence. But for some slight reference to Delhi, *Waiting for the Mahatma* inexplicably remains silent about the horrors of the partition in the East and West Punjab.

M. K. Naik, on the other hand, comments that in this novel dealing with the Gandhian freedom struggle, Narayan, trying to do too many things at once, only succeeds in telling a conventional love story ... If Narayan’s main aim here was to
depict the freedom struggle of 1942, his picture is neither representative nor evocative. 9

Naik also criticizes the novel as an unsuccessful experimentation in the direction of the political motif. 10 He adds: “If the lack of a purposive irony already renders the political theme inconsequential, the tagging on of a conventional love-story to it completes the damage.” 11 Even Uma Parameswaran opines that it is a Gandhian novel. She says:

Technically, Sriram is the hero of the novel and the plot revolves around him; but the predominant figure, even though he is seldom on stage, is Gandhi and the theme is Gandhism. (Parameswaran, 65).

The fact of the matter is that Waiting for the Mahatma is primarily a love story; but every love story must have secondary themes for embellishment to turn it into an interesting novel, and Waiting for the Mahatma has the Indian political scene before Independence and immediately following it, for this purpose. Critics who ascribe ‘politics’ to the novel have perhaps misinterpreted the title of the novel, but a very simple interpretation of the title is possible, namely, the heroine and the hero, Bharati and Sriram, are waiting for the Mahatma to give his consent to their desire to marry. William Walsh rightly observes:

Narayan is not ... a political novelist in the way that, for example, Mulk Raj Anand is, neither is Waiting for the Mahatma a political novel in the way that Coolie or Untouchable is (Walsh, 88).

R. S. Singh also corroborates this view by observing:

On the whole it is a romance written against the political backdrop of pre-Independence days. ... Narayan has failed, most of the critics think, in exploiting artistically this immensely important theme of national resurgence. But it must be remembered that Narayan is a writer of surface realities. Naturally, therefore, he did not give in this “political” (?) novel a
picture of Mahatma Gandhi; nor did he intend to write a “War and Peace” (1869) on the fateful period of the national struggle for freedom. P. S. Sundaram rightly says: *Waiting for the Mahatma* is not a political novel. He [Narayan] is not concerned with projecting a Gandhi image, but telling the story of a very average young man and what happens to the two (Sriram and Bharati) of them” (Singh,61).

Even Shiv K. Gilra is of the same view, as his following remarks confirm:

> It is not precisely a political novel although the backdrop has distinct national and, more precisely, political overtones. ... The question, however, is whether Narayan meant *Waiting for the Mahatma* to be a political or Gandhian novel. The theme of Gandhism as portrayed in the novel has a certain context. It is to be viewed in relation to Sriram, the hero of the novel, who is weak, indecisive and unassertive. ... The theme of Gandhism is, more or less incidental; it is not as basic to the novel as it is, say, to *Kanthapura* (Gilra,41-42).

Meenakshi Mukharjee’s comment more pointedly puts forth the same view:

> Thus to condemn *Waiting for the Mahatma* as an inadequate presentation of the Gandhian movement is to condemn it for not doing something Narayan never set out to do. ¹²

Both Bharati and Sriram are orphans. Bharati’s father died during the 1920 non-co-operation movement, facing a police lathi as a satyagrahi, just when she was born, while Sriram’s father was a soldier in the British army and was killed in Mesopotamia in the war. When Mahatma Gandhi learnt of the death of Bharati’s father, he became her godfather and when her mother died, she was practically adopted by the local Sevak Sangh. Sriram’s mother had died delivering him, and he was brought up by his grandmother. Sriram is thus a spoilt child brought up under the pampering of his granny, idling away most of his time. Bharati, on the other hand, grows up under the influence of the Mahatma and his disciples, and is a well disciplined, diligent
woman rendering social and political chores according to Mahatma’s wishes and guidance. Sriram and Bharati first meet in the market of Malgudi, while Bharati is collecting funds for the movement, and asks Sriram for his contribution. He is stunned and at once falls in love with her:

Sriram’s throat went dry and no sound came. He had never been spoken to by any girl before; she was slender and young, with eyes that sparkled with happiness. He wanted to ask, ‘How old are you? What caste are you? Where is your horoscope? Are you free to marry me?’

Sriram is totally boyish, immature in his approach to Bharati, but steadfast in his pursuit of her, and succeeds in winning her over. In the process he becomes a follower of the Mahatma, learns to spin, participates in the freedom movement and also undergoes imprisonment. Thus his love for Bharati inspires him to transform himself from an idle dependent on his granny to a self-sufficient, self-reliant man of purpose reaching the noble level at which Bharati is and takes him. M. K. Naik seems unnecessarily harsh in his comment: “Sriram’s sudden conversion into a freedom fighter is unconvincing, because he is so obviously interested in Bharati and not in ‘Bharat-mata’ (Mother India).”, because there is nothing unusual in love uplifting a person. Or one may justifiably say that the Mahatma’s influence converts Sriram from what he was to what he ultimately becomes. Meenakshi Mukharjee hints at it in her following comment:

A comparative study of R. K. Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma and Raja Rao’s Kanthapura may serve as a useful starting-point because these two novels deal basically with the same theme: the impact of Gandhian thought on an ordinary Indian. In Narayan’s book this impact is felt by an individual; in Raja Rao’s, by a community. ... The impact of Gandhi transmitted through Bharati changes his whole life, bringing him out of the smug somnolence of pampered adolescence ... (Mukharjee, 38, 42).
When Bharati encounters Sriram, in the hut where Mahatmaji sojourns in Malgudi, waiting for her after all other people have left and even Bapu has gone to sleep, she is polite to him in spite of his foolhardiness. In order properly to appreciate Bharati’s behaviour to a stranger, devoid of fright or reserve or bashfulness, one has to remember that as Mahatma’s follower, non-violence means to her love and compassion for all mankind, and if the lowliest of the low has to be treated kindly, Sriram surely does not deserve any harshness. Moreover, she is not brought up in a narrow family circle and so, sex-consciousness so powerfully injected in an average Indian girl right from puberty or even earlier is luckily lacking in her, and she does not shun Sriram. She herself tells him: “I am practicing kindness, otherwise I should not be speaking to you at all” (WM, 57). She takes him to Bapu when he expresses his desire to join their camp. It is the turning point of his life.

Gandhiji appoints Bharati as Sriram’s ‘Guru’ and assures him that she will look after him, but warns: “Remember that she is your Guru, and think of her with reverence and respect, and you will be all right and she will be all right” (WM, 93).

Bharati proves as good a Guru as she is a disciple and starts with teaching Sriram how to spin on the ‘charkha’. She takes him to the Mcmpi hill, when Mahatma is jailed in August 1942, from where they carry on the freedom struggle. She is mindless of the hardships involved, and Sriram thinks: “…she doesn’t seem to feel she is a woman” (WM, 101). She even courts arrest as per Mahatma’s directive, and leaves Sriram alone to pursue the movement.

Independence is achieved but neither the Mahatma nor Bharati has any respite because the country suffers the woes of Partition and is immersed in the sea of communal frenzy. Bharati accompanies Mahatma to the various places affected by serious riots for about a year, disregarding the danger to her life and honour, and is prepared to take her own life with her own hands, rather than surrender her honour, as advised by Mahatma. When Sriram meets her in Delhi she is in charge of refugee children sheltered in a colony of huts.
He finds her extremely busy throughout the day, always attending to children, washing and dressing them, feeding them, putting them to sleep. She is so engrossed in her duties, she hardly notices Sriram’s presence for hours. After hearing about her past year’s work and personally watching her service to the refugee children and others, Sriram seems overawed:

He was frightened of her. She seemed too magnificent to be his wife. ... Sriram was amazed at the ease with which she moved about the place. He was confirmed in his view that she was too good for him, that he had no right to expect her to become his wife (WM,246-247).

William Walsh pays a tribute to Bharati, and very rightly, when he says she is “indeed in temperament almost a projection of the saint [Gandhiji] himself” and adds “Gandhi who appears only intermittently is, by means of this girl [Bharati], indirectly present throughout the novel” (WM,90). Bharati no doubt is a model example of the Indian women emerging under the Mahatma’s influence during the relevant period.

We know that Sriram is smitten at first sight and virtually makes a clean breast of it when he meets Bharati for the first time and asks her: “Why don’t you take me as your pupil?” and when she asks why, he boldly tells her: “Because I like you, and I like to be with you” (WM,59). Even before the Mahatma he frankly admits: “I like to be where Bharati is” (WM,70). Narayan is, however, not explicit as to when the seed of love is sown in Bharati’s heart, unless one assumes that silence is half consent in her case. They keep a restrained distance though they work together for months. She seems to be unaware of the wild emotions she at times rouses in him. It is only his unpremeditated assault which overwhelms her, and though wriggling she responds to his caresses, and to his murmur: “I always knew it. You are my wife.”, she replies: “Not yet. I must wait for Bapu’s sanction” (WM,133). That betrays her. Her remorse for the incident makes her sob and say:
This is very wrong – we – we should not have – I – I – I don’t know what Bapu will think of me now. I – must – write to him what has happened (WM,133).

Bapu’s sanction comes, but after a long wait, and after both of them have undergone imprisonment as freedom fighters, and not a day too early because on the very evening Bapu is assassinated.

It is problematic how Bharati, so efficient and lively and leading such a useful life, can fall in love with a good-for-nothing sort of man, like Sriram, who is an idler, a weakling and leading a pointless life. But that is the mystery of love! And who are we to decide whether, in any love-pair, the man or the woman deserves the other or not?

Her duties as Mahatma’s soldier occupy the first place in Bharati’s mind. Even love and marriage come next. This is evident when Sriram asks her: “Don’t you feel disappointed that we are not married?”

“I have other things to think of,” she said.

“Oh!” Sriram said significantly. “What may they be?”

“I am going to jail ….” (WM,137).

Bharati is resolute, and authoritative, vivacious and versatile and tender at heart. She has set high goals for herself and insists that Sriram also accompany her to that noble level. As Shantha Krishnaswamy aptly observes: “She [Bharati] wages a ceaseless battle to uplift his [Sriram’s] mind, inspires him, … to adapt to Gandhian way of living” (Krishnaswamy,121). She is born in an age which is known in India for its revolutionary social reforms under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Girls have started taking education and thousands of women leave their hearths and home to participate in the various programmes of civil disobedience movement, etc., announced by Mahatmaji and the Indian National Congress. Bharati is doubly blessed to have been with Gandhiji from her childhood. She thus represents the awakening Indian womanhood and is yet unaffected by the Western models of modernity. It is a transition period for the women of India who start shedding their age-old
shackles of social tyrannies, of male dominance and of the darkness of ignorance. To quote Krishnaswamy again:

Bharati is an unusual girl in unusual times. She is a trend setter who widens the female’s perspectives in the nation’s cause. ... Bharati is important as a transition point between the passive and the active feminine consciousness in Indian fiction (Krishnaswamy, 122).

When Shantha Krishnaswamy says, “The meek female has given place to a vibrant female like Bharati who is succeeded by Rosie [The Guide] and Daisy [The Painter of Signs].”, she also gives an interesting account of the co-effect of such change. She maintains:

It is a curious factor in Indian literature, easily noted in a writer like Narayan, that the emergence of the active feminine is accompanied by the reduction of the male. The hero is no longer there. What we have is the antihero who exhibits the Sartorian nausea. He is unheroic, weakminded often unlovable and invariably pales ‘beside his female’ counterpart. ... Sriram, Raju [The Guide] and Raman [The Painter of Signs] are puny creatures as compared to earlier male protagonists like Krishnan [The English Teacher], Margayya [The Financial Expert] or Jagan [The Vendor of Sweets]. The woman, on the other hand, turns out to be a larger than life figure, often assuming mythic proportions in the eyes of her male counterpart (Krishnaswamy, 123).

It can easily be seen that the above assertion fairly and squarely fits the male and female protagonists of Waiting for the Mahatma.

The only other important woman character in Waiting for the Mahatma is the grandmother of Sriram, who has brought this orphan up right from his birth. And a praiseworthy trait of her character is revealed by the fact that she does not spend anything from the military pension meant for him, but credits it every month in the ‘Fund Office’, and hands it over to him when he
becomes a major, with the worldly advice: “One is always better off with money unspent. It’s always safer to have one’s bank balance undamaged” (WM,16). She succinctly states her moral code, in regard to this pension-money, to her friend: “I was only a trustee of his money. From today he will take care of his own” (WM,13).

She is orthodox and superstitious; refuses to sit on a canvas chair, purchased by Sriram specially for her, saying: “This is some kind of leather, probably cow-hide, and I can’t pollute myself by sitting on it” (WM,20). She is so orthodox that she would not let the scavenger approach nearer than ten yards, and habitually adopts a bullying tone while addressing him. So naturally she is opposed to Mahatma’s views on caste and untouchability:

For her the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police (WM,62).

When the schoolmaster brings her the news that Sriram is in Mahatma’s camp, she even scolds him: “It is teachers like you who have ruined our boys and this country” (WM,62). When Mahatma asks Sriram to obtain his granny’s blessing before joining the camp, he is very pessimistic about getting it from ‘such an ill-informed, ignorant and bigoted personality’ (WM,79-80), and actually finds her, during his conversation with her for the purpose, ‘absolutely reckless, frivolous, and without the slightest sense of responsibility or respect’ (WM,83). Sriram realizes that his granny is too old to understand new things which are completely beyond her comprehension, and he leaves her for the camp without her blessing.

What Meena Shirwadkar has to say about grandmothers in Narayan’s novels is worth quoting:

In an Indian joint family granny and her repertory of Puranic and legendary stories is quite a common thing. Narayan’s skilful variations of this well-known fact are worth noting. There is a touch of Tagore in his handling of the grandmother and her stories. But in Waiting for the Mahatma, Sriram’s granny makes
use of a story to force him to eat. In *The English Teacher* the grandmother's stories are a means of making the motherless girl feel a sense of belonging. There again, the grandmother is a protective power as she is with Swami (Shirwadkar, 83-84).

William Walsh presents the granny's character in a nutshell when he describes her as "the gruff and vital Granny, a woman of extreme devotion, touchiness, orthodoxy and individuality" (Walsh, 91).

To sum up, Narayan has tried his hand on a much wider canvas in this novel by including historical and documentary elements in an otherwise simple romantic love story. The heroine is a woman with spotless character living an ideal life, and like touchstone converts the hero from iron to gold. Bharati is portrayed as an independent woman, capable of living her own life and taking her own decisions, and she does not need any male protection. At the same time, her sense of 'independence' does not make her prejudicial towards family life. She is prepared, nay, eager to welcome and fulfil her role as a wife.

The major women protagonists of the three novels examined in this Chapter are neither acute sufferers of the tyrannies of traditions, as Savitri of *The Dark Room* is, discussed in the earlier chapter, nor are they complete breakers of traditions, as are, say, Rosie and Daisy of *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* respectively, to be discussed in the next chapter. All these women belong to a period in the history of India of the twentieth century, which experienced a slow but steady transition towards betterment of the plight of the Indian women. During this period men started loosening their as yet tight hold over their womenfolk.

Of course, Shanti has been compared with Rosie, but the comparison itself shows that there is only a superficial similarity between the two characters. Shanti has neither the strength of will nor the guts to break traditions as Rosie does; nevertheless Shanti, it is clear, is not a victim of traditions, and enjoys some freedom to choose her own course of action. She can separate from her husband and live independently taking her son with her,
she can join a film company, and she can also develop friendship with Sampath to a level at which, not she but Sampath thinks of converting it into marriage.

Similarly, Srinivas’ wife, though husband-devoted, is not husband-bound in the sense of being in bondage. In fact, she is a much cared-for wife, and Srinivas gives due consideration to her needs and wishes, and she has an effective enough voice in the management of the affairs of the household.

Meenakshi, Margayya’s wife, is not as fortunate as Srinivas’ wife, inasmuch as there is a vast difference in the characters of Margayya and Srinivas; the former is obstinate and dominating, while the latter is considerate and generous. But Meenakshi is none the less a loved wife and she is also a loved mother, and there is no trace of tyranny in the treatment she gets both from her husband and her son, though both are, in general, rough in their behaviour.

And lastly, Bharati, Mahatma’s disciple, as already discussed in detail earlier, is an ideal representative of the transition period. And it is no wonder, because the one person who contributed the most in bringing about this transition, the Mahatma, was her mentor, her Guru, her ideal. She represents a typical example of an inconspicuous transformation of the Indian womanhood from domestic drudgery to sizeable participation in socio-political issues along with the men. She imbibes what is good or desirable in traditions; for example, she considers Mahatma’s consent necessary to her marriage. But she does not feel any inhibitions of traditions, for instance, when she undertakes social or political tasks assigned to her and mixes freely with men for the purpose, and so on.

These three novels thus reveal a distinct phase in Indian modern history’s chapter of women’s evolving social status, and, therefore, have been discussed in this dissertation as a separate group.

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**Notes**


2. R. K. Narayan, *Mr. Sampath* – The Printer of Malgudi 1st Indian ed. (1949; Madras: Indian Thought Publications, 1956) 41. (All subsequent references are to this edition). Henceforth abbreviated as SPM and page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text itself.


8. Ibid., 7.


Naik, *History* 164.

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