CHAPTER - III

R.K. MARAYAN - THE Ironic Image
R.K. NARAYAN AND THE IRONICAL IMAGE

Of all Narayan's novels, "Waiting for the Mahatma," perhaps, has created a lot of controversy, a controversy that revolves round the portrayal of Gandhi, among the literary critics. Even the otherwise Narayan's staunch admirers like A.N.Kaul, C.D.Narasimhaiah and Ramesh Srivastava find it difficult to approve, if not to appreciate, the image of Gandhi in the novel. For A.N.Kaul, the novel is the weakest of its author's output and "a pointless work."¹ Prof. C.D.Narasimhaiah is more critical of it and goes to the extent of advising Narayan to withdraw it from circulation. He feels that the novelist has made a muddle of the Gandhian principles and wonders whether the novel is a serious story or a fantasy.

The defenders of Narayan's portrayal of Gandhi argue that the novel "Waiting for the Mahatma" should not be considered a political one since Gandhi is projected as perceived by ordinary men and women. Mr.N.Radha Krishnan in his Indo-Anglian Fiction says that many of the critics approach the novel as a political one, while it is not. He explains "Narayan, it should be said, in all fairness,

seems to have considered all aspects of the venture in
which, Gandhi, an almost mythical person, is made a
character. He continues, "Every one knows that Gandhi
is too big to be given a minor role and that to give him a
major role would involve that risk of converting the work
into biography." The critic thus asks the reader to view
Gandhi in Waiting for The Mahatma through the eyes of ordi­
nary mortals like Sivaram, Bharathi and the like.

Prof. P.S. Sudaram, another critic, asserts that "His
(Narayan's) novel is not a political novel. He is not con­
cerned with projecting a Gandhian image ..." R.A. Jayantha
concurs with the former view saying that Waiting for The
Mahatma is not a Gandhian novel as one takes it to be.
According to him, "Waiting for The Mahatma is actually the
love story of Srimam and Bharathi, told against the background
of the Gandhian decades of Indian's struggle" and proceeds
to explain that "the chief interest of novel and of Gandhi in
it remains human rather than political and that the novelist
feels free to allow his comic irony and play upon events and
people as he does in his other novels." He also says that

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2N. Radhakrishnan, "The Image of Gandhi," Indo-Anglian
Fiction: Major trends and themes) Madras: Emerald Publishers,

3Ibid., p. 72.

4P.S. Sundaram, R.K.Narayan (New Delhi: Arnold specific

5R.A. Jayantha, Triveni, 51, No.5 (July-Aug 1982) 57.
the novel gives a faithful account of Gandhi's habits and routine activities, his walks, his spinning, his hours of prayer and rest, his love of children and his disarming ways with the people of all kinds. But with all his defence, Prof. Jayantha gives only a qualified approval of Narayan's portrayal of Gandhi, for, it is only a partial portrayal of the Mahatma as known to the average man.

Considering the opinions of both the protagonists and the antagonists of Narayan's Gandhi, one may conclude that the arguments for and against the portrayal mainly rely on the premises whether to consider the novel as a political novel or not. A problem arises here—how to define a political novel? Whether the action that happens in the novel is not of political nature and the activities of Sriram, Bharathi and Gandhi have any political significance or not?

Gandhi, for the majority of Indians, is an avatar and a superhuman being. As such, if any novelist depicts Gandhi with ordinary human qualities and susceptibilities, it is considered almost a sacrilege. Hence if Gandhi is to be portrayed as a character in any novel, he must be pictured as a God on earth with no human weaknesses, who swept the Indian minds during the national movement.
R.K. Marayan, it seems, is not interested in Gandhi, the Mahatma or a shrewed politician, who knows the pulse of the people. He is interested in portraying Gandhi as seen by the common crowd, and how Gandhism is distorted to every one's advantage as shown in *The Vendor of Sweets*. It appears as though Marayan is vexed with the modern Gandhians who lips Gandhian ideology day in and day out, only for their selfish ends.

A thorough reading of the novel *Waiting for The Mahatma* makes Marayan's intentions clear. Even if one considers the novel a political one, there is nothing wrong in showing the personal aspects of a politician. One cannot ignore the background of Quit India Movement, apart from the Britishers attempts to mobilize the Indians in support of their war efforts. M.K. Naik aptly comments that many critics have neglected the dominant irony in the novel as "Indian readers who normally expect an Indian writer to paint a contemporary picture of Gandhi and Gandhism."\(^6\)

It does not mean that Marayan's portrayal of Gandhi or Gandhism is uncomplimentary. Marayan, a shrewd observer of people, especially the middle class, has reflected their

attitude to Gandhism, in his work. The very baptism of Sriram to Gandhism shows that Sriram is converted mainly because of his eagerness to be nearer to Bharathi, with whom he falls in love. He makes his intentions clear when he says, "If that girl can be with Mahatmaji, I can also be there." When the mayor of Malgudi arranges a reception to Gandhi it is not because of his interest in Gandhian ideology. Gandhism is a means to achieve personal ends.

R.K. Narayan exposes the true colours of the Mayor through the comments of audience. When the mayor speaks of Gandhi some one from the audience comments, "Some people conveniently adopt patriotism when Mahatmaji arrives." He rightly points out the duel nature of these opportunists, when he says that the mayor, "runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds." Narayan's main aim, it appears clear now, is to picturise the attitudes of various people to Gandhi. M.K. Naik observes, "While Narayan's picture of Gandhiji is complimentary enough, he highlights the Mahatma's concern for truth, his simplicity, his sense of discipline, his dignity, his

7. R.K. Narayan, WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications)
8. Ibid., p. 16.
9. Ibid., p. 17.
love of children, his sense of humour - it seems to me the real focus of the novel is the ironic portrayal of the response of various Indians to Gandhiji's thoughts and philosophy. 10

Sriram, the wayward and vacillating youth is first attracted by the sweet looks of Bharathi, a young Gandhian volunteer. In order to be with her and earn her love he joins the Gandhian retinue. He knows the greatness of the Mahatma even though he does not understand the Gandhian ideology. He is afraid of doing, anything wrong and sinful before the Mahatma. It can be clearly noticed that his awareness of the Mahatma's greatness is not based on his personal experience. It relies on the collective knowledge of the common Indian, who considers Gandhi an avatar and a miracle maker. In the beginning, Gandhi is only a means to Sriram to acquire the love of Bharathi. But at the same time he is not sure whether he would be successful in it by becoming a Gandhian volunteer. For sometime, his mind completely made up to earn the concrete good-will of a Granny-rather than the doubtful and strange favours of big wigs like the Mahatma and snobs like Bharathi... But still the pull of Bharathi was strong and he could not get away

from the place so easily as he had imagined."\(^{11}\)

We notice that, in the novel, SriRam represents an ordinary average man with human susceptibilities. It is clear that Narayan's intention is to show the impact of Gandhian ideas on a section of society that SriRam, a small town-man represents. Of course, for SriRam, Gandhi symbolizes Mahatma hood. But, for the tradition loving SriRam's Granny Gandhi is a dangerous man. The author writes, "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."\(^{12}\) Even Bharathi the beloved daughter of Gandhi forgets him once she is with SriRam. Of course she is not to be blamed for it, since it is the nature of young lovers. Everything also becomes oblivious once they are together. Perhaps it is here many critics see the novel gradually drifting from the Gandhian theme. The author cannot be blamed for this, since the portrayal of SriRam and Bharathi is natural. When they accompanied Gandhi in his tour of the famine affected areas they are not moved by the gory surroundings. They enjoy each others company. As Narayan clearly depicts, "However


\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 41.
grim the surroundings might be. Sriam and Bharathi seemed to notice nothing. They had a delight in each others company which mitigates the gloom of the surroundings.\textsuperscript{13}

With Gandhi, it is a different matter. He is moved to tears observing the poverty and misery of famine stricken villagers. He solaces them by talking of God. At the same time he does not miss the opportunity to talk of war and the Britishers. Gandhi’s love for the down-trodden and his simplicity gradually draw Sriam closer to Gandhi. And finally when Gandhi leaves Sriam and Bharathi, Sriam feels the void. Narayan points out, “For the first time during all these weeks, Sriam felt depressed and unhappy. The thought of having to live mundane existence without Mahatma appalled him. Not even the proximity of Bharathi seemed to mitigate his misery.”\textsuperscript{14} Of course it does not imply that Sriam has understood Gandhian ideology in its true sense. To put it more clearly, it is Gandhiji’s sincerity, simplicity and honesty that influenced many Indians like Sriam and brought them under his sway. As R.A.Jayantha remarks, “In the pages of \textit{Waiting for the Mahatma} Gandhi is seen endearing himself to people and commanding universal reverence not merely as

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 59.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 62.
a votary of truth and non-violence, but by his child-like qualities, his spontaneous humanity and compassion."{15}

If at all there is one character, who is a true Gandhian and who appears to have understood Gandhism it is Bharathi. Even she, it appears strange, soon falls in love with Sriram, a complete stranger. It is her adherence to truth and love for Gandhi, that makes her wait for Gandhi's approval for their marriage. She is instrumental in converting the wayward youth Sriram into a Gandhian volunteer. It is only through her that Narayan pictures the true Gandhian, "It is a fact," as N. Radhakrishnan writes, "that the lefty ideals of Mahatma Gandhi were beyond the reach of many of the freedom fighters, though they did not seem to worry about it. Sriram belongs to this group."{16} Of course Narayan attempts to show that there are quite a few others like Bharathi who truly understood Gandhism and remained Gandhian. She knows Gandhi well. Gandhi never hid anything from his country men and expected the same from them. That is why she does not want to take a decision of her marriage without Gandhi's approval, however eager Sriram is.


Narayan, it appears, also wants to show how peripheral Gandhi's influence is on the youth like Sriram, for Sriram is easily converted into a terrorist once he is devoid of the leadership of even Bharathi. He indulges in destroying bridges under the directions of Jagdish, a staunch supporter of Subash Bose. The characters of Bharathi, Sriram and Jagdish are well judged by Shiva M. Pandya, in the light of their approach to Gandhi. Pandya observes, "Bharathi represents the meek and thorough going ordinary disciple of Gandhi. Jagdish and Sriram represent only an imperfect realisation of what Gandhi taught and practised, because they had not fully practised the principles of discipline and right living." 17

For the Gandhian admirers, who expect an idealised picture of Gandhi in similar lines as portrayed by other novelists like Bhabbanji Bhattacharya or even Raja Rao (in Kanthapura) Narayan's sketch of Gandhi's character may not appeal, since it surely falls short of their expectations. In Waiting for The Mahatma Gandhi is not the avatar who at will, can transform evil into good. He is not an idealized hero, who drove away the mighty Britishers with his mantras of non-violence and satyagraha. As William Walsh feels there is no touch of sentimentality nor pretentiousness in Gandhi's

portrayal. He observes, "Gandhi is both a man, a real, worn, ordinary person and a god who, as Lawrence said, knows what realities are and never fails in that knowledge."

Narayan wants to show the fact that in spite of Gandhi's impact on the whole gamut of society, there are a very few Indians who really understood him or his ideology. If critics like Ramesh Srivastava bemoans to see Gandhi as a match-maker it is because they expect Narayan to be a biographer of Gandhi who deals, as per rule, with all the aspects of Gandhi's life. Narayan here simply wants to focus Gandhi, the man not Gandhi, the shrewd politician. The portrayal of Gandhi has given ample scope to the novelist to deal with other characters and events ironically and also shows how fake Gandhians behave. Narayan's Gandhi is not a miracle-maker and the author exposes the fact however unpalatable it is, for many, that a large section of Indians did not understand Gandhism properly at all. To summarise the portrayal of Gandhi in Waiting for the Mahatma in the words of Rama Jha "Narayan's obvious intention in Waiting for the Mahatma is to show the nature and the extent of Gandhi's impact on the average Indian."


The portrayal of the Gandhi character in 'The Vendor of Sweets' is less criticised than that of 'The Waiting for the Mahatma.' The critics seem to be less harsh with the novel in its treatment of Gandhi. To begin with, Rama-Jha says, "If any of Narayan's character is modelled after Gandhi, it is the fifty-five-year-old Jagan, the protagonist of The Vendor of Sweets." Jagan follows the Gandhian way of life to the minutest details, meeting natural salts, wearing Khadi, spinning charka, reading the Geeta, and writing a book on 'nature therapy'. Not only that, he shod his feet with thick sandals made out of the leather of an animal which "had died of old age". Being a follower of Gandhi, he feels, "I do not like to think that a living creature should have its throat cut for the comfort of my feet."  

Of course, Jagan follows Gandhian principles in toto as far as his habits are concerned. But it does not mean that he is a true Gandhian as Moorthy of Kanthapura is. Jagan is obviously more mundane than spiritual. In spite of his regular reading of the Geeta and eloquently uttering of 'conquer taste, and you will have conquered the self.'


3Ibid., p. 5.
His simple living helps him to spend less on himself and he is more clerical in his dealing of monetary matters. As William Walsh feels, rightly so, Jagan's character contains that small flaw in making for safety. He writes, "Into the largeness of his spiritual ambition into his imitation of Gandhi, there is inserted a small measure of mercantile flexibility. This enables him, when his staff has been paraded and dismissed for the night, to make up two cash books."4

Jagan is a shrewed business man who plans the use of left over of his sweets. Narayan writes, "It bothered him to think of the left overs. They rankled in his mind as if he had a splinter in his skull."5 But Jagan is also clever enough to satisfy his stirring soul. Defending his action of preparing new sweets with left overs, he exclaims, "After all, everything consists of flour, sugar and flavours."6 He is practical for he knows Gandhian honesty does not help him survive in this un-Gandhian world. That is why he does not worry a bit when he hoodwinks the tax officials as he entered the cash that he received only up till six O'clock in the account book. Of course, Jagan has qualms when he

6 Ibid., p. 10.
sees school children hungrily looking at the sweets. At the same time he knows fully well that he cannot afford to distribute the sweets freely. He pacifies his questioning heart saying, "It's up to their parents to provide them with the money for sweets." Narayan reveals Jagan's mind as he struggles hard to come out of compassion for the poor children who greedily look at the sweets. Jagan asks his watchman not to allow the children to stand before the shop for they obstruct the traffic. Narayan writes, "Jagan always mentioned the word "obstruction" because the sight of children at the counter made him uneasy, even guilty at times. He preferred them to go away without looking at the sweets hungrily." As for money is concerned Jagan is not the one to part with it easily whatever may be the compulsions. When the cousin questions why he is accumulating money Jagan philosophically explains, "I do not accumulate. It just grows naturally. What can I do? Moreover, I work because it is one's duty to work." Inspite of his love for Mali he is not prepared to invest money on Malis' proposed industry for he is not sure of its success. He pretends to ignore the whole business. He even tries to avoid both Mali and his mistress.

7 Ibid., p. 19.
8 Ibid., p. 55.
9 Ibid., p. 20.
Thus he practises Gandhian principle of non-violent, non-co-operation when it suits him.

Jagan, unlike Sri Ram of "The Waiting for The Mahatma," is a shrewd man, who has understood the complexities of Gandhian ideology. He knows how to make use of it to safeguard his personal interests. Once he reduces the price of sweets in his shop in a mood of disillusion after encountering Mali, when Mali pesters him for money. But he is careful enough to rationalise it by involving the Gandhian ideology, "I wanted to serve public in my own way by making available pure sweets, particularly for poor children." It is the same Jagan who once feels that "it is up to their parents to provide them with the money." Jagan thus uses Gandhian ideology whenever it suits his purpose. Narayan himself wryly comments, "If Gandhi has said somewhere, 'pay your sales tax uncomplainingly,' he would have followed his advice." Of course, luckily for Jagan, "Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagan's knowledge." Perhaps Narayan is too optimistic of Jagan's adherence to Gandhian

10 Ibid., p. 68.
11 Ibid., p. 19.
12 Ibid., p. 83.
13 Ibid., p. 83.
ideology. Jagan could have easily twisted Gandhi's words to suit his purpose. Jagan is too much attached to his belongings to pay tax. Even when he decides to renounce the worldly life and goes to settle in an ashram, he is particular of keeping his cheque book with him.

Jagan more or less resembles the modern Gandhian's of the post-independence era, who chant Gandhian mantra day in and day out but never practise it in their daily lives. Gandhian image certainly gives them a place of honour in the society. Walsh rightly points out, "He is proud of being called a Gandhian." Whereas Sriram of 'Waiting for the Mahatma' joins Gandhi's band wagon without understanding the implications of Gandhism, Jagan looks like a person who tries to cash in on his association with Gandhi and freedom struggle. Walsh aptly comments on Jagan's character "Jagan is Narayan's caricature of the present day Gandhian." Jagan always boasts of his association with Gandhi. He even utters falsehood, "I have to leave the college when Gandhi ordered us non-cooperate. I spent the best of my student years in prison, saint Jagan, feeling heroic, his reminiscental mood slurring over the fact that he had failed several times in the B.A. ceased to attend the college and had begun to take his examinations.

as a private candidate long before the call of Gandhi.\textsuperscript{16} Narayan may have in his mind the fake Gandhians, who produce false certificates that they have participated in freedom struggle and suffered imprisonment in order to gain freedom fighters' pension. Narayan makes Jagan to repeatedly affirm his Gandhian acquaintance. Jagan feeling himself as a Gandhian ruminates about his son Mali. I hope he will also emulate my philosophy of living simple living and high thinking as Gandhi taught us.\textsuperscript{17} Of course there is the first aspect, simple living in Jagan but he lacks high thinking for his world of thought is limited to his family members, not even the people of Malgudi.

Unlike Gandhi, Jagan is an exhibitionist. He gloats over the farewell given to him when he first took part in the National struggle. Now he feels sorry for none is there to see him off when he has decided to renounce of course partly, his worldly ties. The angularity of Jagan's character is brought out by Narayan in the act of Jagan's renunciation. He is aggrieved for he is not given a warm send off. Like a sound businessman he arranges for his shop to be opened by his cousin and worries when he should leave the keys. He cannot refrain from taking his cheque book with him as a

\textsuperscript{16}The Vendor of Sweets, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 29.
comfort in his exile in the spiritual world. A true Gandhi indeed!

Jayan’s attachment to his son Mali is un-Gandhian. His too much affection for the motherless child spoils him. Mali grows up into a defiant and irresponsible youth. Jahan here is a true representative of traditional middle class father. He wants the boy to complete his degree and seek some government job. But Mali expresses his desire to leave the college and become a writer. Jahan is very unhappy. But he cannot assert himself. He satisfies his wounded pride with the hope that Mali would become a great writer. Then Mali decides to leave for America to learn the art of writing. To Jahan it is unthinkable, for America is a place where people eat, beef, drink and the women are free. But he cannot restrain Mali. Jahan hopes that Mali would board a steamer instead of flying to America. To his shock he learns that Mali has already booked his ticket paying Rs. 10,000/- towards plane fare from his hoarded amount. Of course Jahan is now no more a worried man. He resigns himself to whatever that happened and tries to satisfy himself in the happenings. Now he regularly pontificates on his son’s American tour. However, to his shock, Jahan learns that Mali has started eating beef. It shocks his sentiments. He is very careful not to reveal this to any
one. When Mali returns from America with Grace, a complete stranger, Jagan starts avoiding people lest he would be questioned. Gradually he reconciles with the situation and develops a rapport with his daughter-in-law. But once again he is in for a shock. He comes to know that they are not married. He feels that his house is polluted. It is a shock to his Gandhian values. But he tries to adjust with the situation by proposing to conduct their marriage secretly. It is middle class mentality not be particular of any thing. It is always vacillating and prove to adjustments and compromises. A.N.Kaul aptly says that "Jagan is a man of mixed motives and ridiculous obscurantism to boot. He is primarily a self proclaimed 'Gandhian' that is the sort of a person who has so far long passed muster as the Mahatma's followers in our country." But the truth is that Gandhian religious sentiments themselves are full of ridiculous obscurantism for Gandhi is the persons who asserts his faith in caste system but at the same time propogates for the removal of untouchability. Perhaps Jagan is shrewd to adopt Gandhian ideology to the changing conditions of the society. Jagan's Gandhian detachment to his son appears

only in the last part of the novel. He learns that his son Mali is arrested by anti-prohibition squad. Of course, the cousin assures Jagan that their lawyer can easily get Mali released by arguing that the police have falsely implicated Mali. Jagan receives this news with shock and sorrow and is worried of Mali. But his conscience wakes up soon and he considers it sin to cook up charges on the policemen. He feels that his son deserves punishment. Only on this occasion does Jagan reveals his adherence to Gandhian values. Otherwise "Jagan is both a comic and anguished figure, comic in his innocent combination of commercial sharpness, fiscal duplicity, variety and genuine reference for Gandhian spirituality, anguished in his lacerated relationship with sullen brutish son Mali." 19

Finally it can safely be concluded that Gandhian image that Narayan tries to portray here, is nothing but of a Gandhi seen through the eyes of and practised by an average middle class Indian. Narayan probes into the character of an individuals against the frame work of Gandhian values, which Narayan appears to uphold. Rama Jha says that Narayan is, "a comic writer who satirises the foibles of the individuals (Jagan and Mali) against the frame work of certain values and

norms he upholds. 20 Harayan's characters unlike Anand's, are neither wholly black nor completely white, we don't find a true Gandhian character in "The Vendor of Sweets." It creates most vividly and convincingly the life of middle class Indian with average intelligence, average practicality and average goodness and average spirituality.