R.K. Narayan (born 1906) is a prolific writer whose novels are marked by unpretentiousness, urbanity and simplicity. Readability is the hallmark of his fictional works. As an excellent story-teller, Narayan possesses in ample measure what E.M. Forster calls "the primitive power of keeping the reader in suspense and playing on his curiosity". Unlike Anand who preaches and teaches because of his passionate commitment to social and economic causes, Narayan entertains with his comic tone and respectable detachment from the broader implications of political unrest in India. His wit and irony as a comic genius presupposes detachment from the people and situations he portrays but it is misleading to view Narayan merely as a "genial story-teller, without much purpose" as "He raises no fundamental issues; the mystery of existence is outside his scope". Narayan presents the physical fact in its identity as physical fact, and there is no straining to load it with any peripheral attractions or distractions. It is for this reason that Narayan remains, to borrow Kantak's phrase, placidly unresponsive to the great debates and issues of the time.

Narayan's art lies in articulating the comicality of men perceived with an irony of delicate texture in objectivity and

detachment. His thrust on the oddities and angularities of his characters invests his tales with a quaint touch of humour, that also springs from description and dialogues of naive and eccentric characters jostling with each other in the restricted but familiar world of Malgudi. As an entertainer and storyteller, Narayan not only shuns the intellectual theme, but also saves his characters from getting involved in moral and social issues. That is why he can easily put aside the compulsive obsession of the times. None of his novels with the possible exception of Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) seriously reflects the political upheavals of the struggle for Independence. Satyagraha movement only forms a part of Narayan's comic projection of life in Malgudi: "Nationalism and nationalists are treated with the same comic irony deployed against cheats, bohemians, bossy wives, indulgent grandparents and the vanishing British".

The National Movement, largely dominated by Gandhian ideology, was more than a mere political struggle for the average Indian. It was an all-pervasive emotional experience which often felt the irresistible pull of different ideologies. During the days of heady action, basic issues got confused and blurred. A large number of people, therefore, did not understand Gandhi at all or fully, although they were among the trusted followers of the Mahatma. The Gandhian approach held out different implications. Besides being a philosophy of life for the devout followers, it was an expedient strategy for quite a few of them.

4 Haydon Moore Williams, Studies in Modern Indian Fiction in English, 1 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973), 53.
With his eye for the comic and unmistakable irony, Narayan could exercise the necessary detachment of an artist to transmute into art the reservoir of literary material provided by the national experience of the turbulent years. His novels Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) and The Vendor of Sweets (1967) have Gandhian reverberations although, so far as Gandhi is concerned, Narayan goes about his task neither to "project an image" nor to enhance our awareness, as he is not documenting or interpreting any period of Indian history. His treatment of Gandhian worker's fads or their glaring oddities is mostly referential and not emotive. Narayan shows in almost a balanced manner the way in which most of his disciples were really influenced by Gandhi. The references to the freedom struggle are reminiscent of Gandhi and his ideology but the novelist is largely concerned with the eccentricities of Gandhi's followers and their incapacity to understand the Mahatma fully.

Waiting for the Mahatma is a major Indian novel in which Gandhi figures prominently. With its sombre elements bearing on the freedom struggle and its outcome, the novel is, verily, Narayan's homage to the Mahatma, both a eulogy and an elegy. The basic issue involved in the book is the impact of Gandhian thought on an average Indian Srim, whose nationalistic zeal is not born out of any ideological conviction but an infatuation for Bharati, a follower of Gandhi. The thrust of the novel is on the ironic portrayal of the response of ordinary people to Gandhi's thought and philosophy. Through his focus on an individual, Narayan seems to suggest that a large segment of Indian people failed to understand Gandhism properly. Srim may be, technically speaking, the hero of the novel, but the
predominant figure, even though he appears only twice in the novel, is Gandhi and the ostensible theme is Gandhism viewed in the backdrop of national events from 1941 to 1948.

The novel has been considered to be "pointless" and "weak in motivation", as it is alleged that "we don't learn anything about Mahatma Gandhi and the narrative lacks punch". It is also suggested that Waiting for the Mahatma fails to grip as it betrays "unsureness and perplexity". Narayan is thought to be guilty of having made a "muddle of the Gandhi principle" as the picture of Gandhi and his movement, painted in the novel, does not conform to the popular portrait of the Mahatma. This criticism of the novel as an inadequate presentation of the Gandhian movement easily overlooks the fact that Waiting for the Mahatma is not a political novel. Narayan is not apparently concerned with the impact Gandhi made on millions of Indians but he is simply telling the story of a very ordinary and unpretentious young man who falls in love with one of Gandhi's followers.

Sriram, a drifter, lives under his grandmother's care in Kabir Street, Malgudi. When Gandhi comes to Malgudi during his tour of South India, the adolescent Sriram falls in love with Bharati, one of Gandhi's disciples, and is, thus, drawn into Gandhi's camp. He gets pushed into the Satyagraha movement.

7 Iyengar, Indian Writing, p.373.
although he has no political idea of his own and never really develops one. Bharati returns his love but she shall not marry him without Gandhi's permission. He stays in Koppal village where Bharati visits him frequently. Sriram and Bharati write to Gandhi asking for permission to marry but 'Quit India' Movement has been launched in the meantime. They are called upon by the Mahatma to court arrest. Sriram stays on in his hideout, a ruined shrine, and refuses to join Bharati who has gone to jail.

Sriram abandons non-violence and surrenders himself to the influence of Jagdish, a terrorist and follower of Subhash Chandra Bose. He is arrested but released after independence. He seeks Bharati who has been working in the areas that have been in the throes of communal violence. They obtain Mahatma's blessings for their marriage but Gandhi is shot, soon afterwards, while he is on his way to the prayer meeting.

There is, thus, a serious comedy punctuated by Narayan's geniality but Gandhian shadow looms large over the story and characters and this imparts the tale a touch of solemnity. It is, therefore, pertinently remarked that Narayan is "attempting to show the epic order, represented by Gandhi and his associates impinging on the normal order of life in Malgudi, with Sriram as the uneasy link between these two levels".9 Narayan's treatment of the Mahatma is conventional to the extent that Gandhi is largely presented as a great soul enjoying the love and adoration of all. The distinguishing aspect of the novel is the delineation

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of Gandhi's private life with respect to his followers. This image of Gandhi, though rather unusual, is complementary to the one usually painted. Equally significant is the attempt of the novelist to draw the conflict between Gandhian ideology and terrorism.

Narayan has introduced Gandhi dramatically into the narrative and he seems to have taken Gandhi's popularity for granted. The details have probably been sifted from the record of Gandhi's tours of South India. The entire town of Malgudi is "eager to have the honour of receiving Mahatma Gandhi". The hectic fervour and enthusiasm of the people waiting for the Mahatma bears resemblance to the eagerness of people to receive Gandhi in Anand's *Untouchable*. A huge crowd, with busybodies of the town to direct the volunteers clad in white khaddar, wait patiently and ungrudgingly on the river bank, although "the sands were warm and the sun was severe" (p.15). Narayan seizes this opportunity to highlight people's false devotion to Gandhi in a tone of mild satire and irony. In the huge gathering, awaiting the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, Sriram is a tiny speck but he wonders if he can attain the importance of volunteers clad in white khaddar:

"A lot of familiar characters, such as an old teacher of his and the pawnbroker in Market Road, made themselves unrecognizable by wearing white khaddar caps. They felt it was the right dress to wear on this occasion. 'That khaddar store off the Market Fountain must have done a roaring business in white caps today', Sriram thought (p.15).

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Narayan seems to approve of the adoration of Gandhi by the common people, albeit they cannot live up to the ideals of the Mahatma but he holds to ridicule the double standards of the elite. When Mr. Natash, the Municipal Chairman, escorts the Mahatma to the dais, the satire is too obvious when someone remarks: "Some people conveniently adopt patriotism when Mahatmaji arrives" (p.16), so that they may have a ride in the big procession and a seat on the dais. As Municipal Chairman, Natash has shown scant regards for the cause of the untouchables. The Harijan colony is probably the worst area in the town and nothing has been done to mitigate their sufferings—a cause so dear to the Mahatma. When Gandhi insists on staying in their midst, the entire force of the Municipality is yoked instantly to give their hovels a face-lift. The novelist comments on their lip-service to Gandhi's ideals in a tone of biting satire and scathing criticism:

"When they got over their initial surprise, the authorities did everything to transform the place. All the stench mysteriously vanished; all the garbage and offal that lay about, and flesh and hide put out to sun-dry on the roofs, disappeared. All that night municipal and other employees kept working, with the aid of petrol lamps; light there was such a rarity that children kept dancing all night around the lamps. Gandhiji noticed the hectic activity, but out of a sense of charity refrained from commenting on it (pp. 33-34).

The novelist has exposed the duplicity of a powerful section of the moneyed classes that swears by Gandhi, talks of simplicity, and austerity practised by the Mahatma but leads a life of luxury and extravagance. Mr. Natash, who also happens to be the Chairman of the Reception Committee, is the richest man of the town. He has spent two lacs on his palatial house in the aristocratic Lawley Extension. His garden and lawns alone have cost him twenty five thousand rupees. He has tastefully
redecorated and renovated his house for the sake of the Mahatma, although he pretends to be a simple man abhoring luxury:

I am a simple man, sir, my needs are very simple. I don't need any luxury. I can live in a hut, but the reason I have built it on this scale is so that I should be able at least once in my life time to receive a great soul like Mahatmaji. This is the only house in which he can stay comfortably when he comes to the town (p.24).

Narayan's comic genius does not fail to observe that the District Collector himself has taken the trouble to go through the Welcome Address (presented to the Mahatma) before it is sent to the press in order to make sure that it contains no insult to the British Empire. The Chairman has spent a whole week composing the text of the address with the help of a local journalist. The Collector carefully deletes all those passages which refer to the work done by Gandhiji in the political field: "The picture of him as a social reformer was left intact and even enlarged; anyone who read the address would conclude that politics were the last thing that Mahatmaji was interested in" (p.26).

Soon after his arrival, Gandhi stands "on the dais, with his palms brought together in a salute". He claps his hands rhythmically and declares: "I want you all to keep this up, this beating for a while". His voice in the amplifier booms when he admonishes the audience for their lack of vigour in their arms. He calls for "more rhythm, more spirit. It must be like the drum-beats of the non-violent soldiers marching on to cut the chains that bind Mother India...."(p.16).

Not that Narayan is expected to 'project an image', but the characterisation of Gandhi is unimaginative and unauthentic.
Narayan has got his facts wrong about Gandhi who has been presented as a 'vivacious', or a dramatic figure "conducting an orchestra or instructing an N.C.C.parade". 12 Sriram is hesitant to add his quota to the 'voluminous noise' of clapping but Gandhi, like an all-watchful stage master, lashes out at his conscience: "I see someone in that corner not quite willing to join us" (p.16). Again, Gandhi admonishes two persons who are talking while he speaks: "I notice two men there talking," boomed Gandhi's voice. "It's not good to talk now, when perhaps the one next to you is anxious to listen. If you disturb his hearing, it is one form of himsa". (p.17).

These idiosyncrasies attributed to the Mahatma, distorted probably from some similar occurrences in Gandhi's long public career, add farcical touches of the burlesque or fantasy. The popular image of Gandhi is distorted beyond redemption, and the picture that emerges is neither historically authentic nor imaginatively credible. The irony of response is lost upon the novelist who has in view neither Gandhi, nor Indian people but his Western readers. Narasimhaiah avers that Narayan has presented in Gandhi a tyrannical school master, more comical than tyrannical, but the novelist is keen to catch the Western eye: "Well, we know the novelist wants to introduce the doctrine of non-violence to American public. Here, if anywhere is the accusation that the Indian writer in English writes to catch the Western eye justified". 13

13 Ibid., p.72.
Narayan has crammed indiscriminately Gandhi's notable pronouncements into the body of his speech. This is just dropping Gandhi's statement inartistically without weaving these utterances into the action or the development of character. This inartistic padding of details serves an important purpose: it shows Narayan's sensibility under stress, with the result that comedy turns into the ridiculous. A discerning reader cannot fail to observe that the novelist gives no 'inside' into Gandhi and his message: "We do not have to bask in the sun and cry 'left' or 'right'. But we have a system of our own to follow: that's Ram Dhun, spinning on the Charkha and practice of absolute Truth and non-violence" (p.17). The need for sexual restraint can hardly be disputed but the suggestions put into the mouth of Gandhi woefully lack pragmatism and border on the absurd:

All women are your sisters and mothers. Never look at them with thoughts of lust. If you are troubled by such thoughts, this is the remedy: Walk with your head down looking at the ground during the day, and with your eyes up, looking at the stars at night" (p.16)

All this is tantamount to pedestrian delineation of Gandhian impact on the masses. Narayan, being essentially a novelist of the middle class, is proficient at animating middle class urban life of South India in his novels but is out of his elements when he steps beyond the middle class world. This limitation accounts for the failure of characterisation in Waiting for the Mahatma. Uma Parmeshwaran, a very perceptive critic of Narayan, observes that he can excellently portray the eccentricities and vices of common men but is out of his depth with good men and supermen: "Mahatma Gandhi was a superman. Sriram, the hero, is a goodman. And so we have in Waiting for
Narayan has marshalled certain familiar habits, characteristics and incidents associated with Gandhi and he sticks them in haphazardly at the first opening he gets. Gandhi always used simple and lucid language; his public meetings began with bhajans and he often mentioned that he expected to live 125 years. Gandhi's distributing the municipal chairman's treasured organs to Harijan children, Gandhi's brisk morning walk, his attending to a number of things simultaneously, his stay at the hovels of the sweepers, spinning as a ritual, his tours through the countryside, and Gandhi's last appearance before falling to an assassin's bullet are faithfully inserted into the plot with a view to giving a colour of authenticity to the narrative but the achievement is not artistically gratifying. Raw material, in itself, does not guarantee any safeguards against its inartistic and crude manipulation and at times even misrepresentation.

A close study of a statement attributed to Gandhi would, for example, serve to explicate Narayan's casual treatment of the raw material. Gandhi's faith in the benevolent of God was proverbial, and his utterances were tinged with his deep reverence for an abiding faith in the Almighty. Now just the reverse is the conclusion one draws from his speech. Gandhi prays for a long lease of life so that he should, on his next visit, be able to address the people in their own language: "Alas! I am too
hard-pressed for time to master it now, although I hope if God in His infinite mercy grants me the longevity due to me, that is one hundred and twenty five years, I shall be able next time to speak to you in Tamil without troubling our friend Natesh" (p.16).

The statement is quite innocent but for three words "due to me", which are meant to cast aspersions on God's justice and His mercy — a fact which could hardly be palatable to Gandhi. If longevity, as Parmeswar perceptively argues, depended on God's mercy, obviously it could not be man's "due", and if a century and a quarter is "due" a man, it speaks little of God's justice to speculate that He might curtail it. 15

It is difficult to agree with the assertion that the historicity of the Gandhian image in Waiting for the Mahatma is unimpeachable. 16 Narayan treats Gandhi in conventionalised manner as he takes for granted the popular portrait of "Bapu" and no serious effort is made to lend credence to this accepted image of Gandhi. Being a comic novelist, Narayan's observation of Gandhi implicit in the novel is only incidental. This detachment shifts the burden of his comic vision on Sriram's adventures as a follower of Gandhi. Sriram as a śtyagrahi is subjected to an intense scrutiny but Gandhi as a character remains comparatively unexplored. This results in weak characterisation of Gandhi and superficial delineation of his effect on the people. In fact, the readability of the novel is sustained by Narayan's weaving

15 Ibid., p.67.
the tale of Sriram's infatuation for the girl into the warp and woof of Gandhian struggle for freedom. There are masterly strokes of irony at times. Gandhi calls upon the audience to practise non-violence and purify their hearts before they may ask the Britishers to "leave this country to be managed or mismanaged" by them. These lofty sentiments have their relevance for Sriram only in terms of his relations with and yearnings for Bharati: "Oh, revered Mahatmaji, have no doubt that my heart is pure and without bitterness. How can I have any bitterness in my heart for a creature who looks so divine?" (p.20).

Waiting for the Mahatma brings into sharp focus the ambivalence of the followers of Gandhi. They proclaim themselves to be the dedicated disciples of the Mahatma, although they neither care to understand Gandhi nor endeavour to realise his ideals in the true sense. Narayan presents such people in their true colours in a satirical vein, though his tone is, by and large, genial, generous and comic. Sriram is meant to represent this section of Gandhian followers.

Sriram is meant to be Gandhian hero in formation, but the traumatic experience of his involvement in the national movement for about a decade and his meeting with the Mahatma, leave no trace of evolution or growth in him. Sriram continues to be a grown-up child. A good-hearted, somewhat spoilt, lazy and purposeless youngman of about twenty, Sriram makes Bharati's acquaintance. Infatuation for the girl turns him into a responsible adult, an obedient disciple and a devoted lover. When Gandhi leaves the South, Sriram joins one of the Gandhian centres. Then, for no conceivable reasons, he takes his abode in an abandoned temple and lives there for an unspecified length of time, having Bharati visit him occasionally.
Dissemination of the message of the Mahatma is the allotted duty of Sriram, but he does not know what the message happens to be. Mahatma's advice is: "Spin and read Bhagwad Gita, and utter 'Ram Nam' continuously; and then you will know what to do in life" (p.64). Then comes 'Quit India' movement launched by the Mahatma. Sriram propagates 'Quit India' slogan on the walls, but the irony of the whole situation lies in the fact that he never bothers to know the implications of the phrase. Sriram is concerned with the letter 'Q' that consumes a lot of black ink. It seems to him possible that "Britain had imported the letter 'Q' into India so that there might be a national drain on black paint" (p.69). A school teacher asks him to write 'Quit India' instead. Sriram threatens him that all those who are not cooperating with Gandhiji would be beheaded when British left India. Sriram further treats the non-establishment of a police post in a village as an 'outrageous act' of the 'Sircar' against the people.

As earlier referred to, Sriram undergoes no transformation, and there are no tangible signs of maturity in him. Sriram continues to be a stupid and ignorant youngman. He is "merely carrying out an order" from Gandhi, Bharati or even Jagdish, the terrorist. Instead of understanding what he does, Sriram seeks shelter in the convenient platitude that Gandhi is a Mahatma and Mahatmas must be obeyed.

Sriram is a poor advocate of Gandhian ideology. Repeatedly, he stumps for an answer. His encounter with the white plantation owner, Mathieson, cuts him to his proper size. When the old Englishman asks why he should quit India when he has spent more than Sriram's life-time here, Sriram coolly sips the juice and racks his brain for an answer. He is no match for the astute
timber contractor who contributes five thousand rupees to the Harijan Fund, has a portrait of Gandhi in his house, and has attended Gandhi's meetings at Malgudi almost daily. The same shrewd businessman who wants to have the best of both the worlds, has also donated five thousand rupees to the War Fund, and obliges the Collector by attending the loyalists meetings. He can ill afford to "displease government officials as he was a businessman". Sriram makes a weak request that the contractor should pray to Gandhiji's picture "that he may inspire you with reasonable thinking" (p.73).

Narayan is excellent at describing comic confrontations, but he lets Sriram remain naive and ignorant as before. The funny situation that develops before a retailer's shop is storm in a tea-cup. Sriram starts picketing the shop as the shopkeeper has thoughtlessly boasted of having the best English biscuits all imported. A small crowd gathers as he lies down on the ground. A woman who needs salt urgently as her sauce is on fire goes back disappointed. A little boy wants snuff for his grandfather but the old man must go without it. The perplexed Sriram feels like writing to the Mahatma about the futility of doing anything for the people like those. The villagers appear to be more interested in the antics of a boy given to tree-climbing than Sriram's boycott of the shopkeeper. He complains: "Revered Mahatmaji, I don't know why we should bother about these folk. They don't seem to deserve anything we may do for them. They sell and eat foreign biscuits". Later, Sriram calls harmonium a 'damned instrument' and blurs out: "I hope when Mahatma Gandhi becomes the emperor of India, he will make it a penal offence to make or play this instrument. This is also a British gift, I suppose" (p.85).
The absurdity of Sriram's faith in Ahimsa, which Gandhi regards as the cardinal virtue for his followers to imbibe, is demonstrated soon, when, frustrated by the audacity of Bharati to consult Gandhi before she could consent to marry Sriram, he joins a terrorist, Jagdish, sets fire to the records in half a dozen law courts, derails a couple of trains and paralyses the work in various schools. He also "exploded a crude bomb which tore off the main door of an agricultural research station, tarred out 'V' for Victory and wrote over the emblem Quit India" (p.113).

The cycle comes full circle when Sriram completes his pilgrimage to the Gandhian shrine in New Delhi after the attainment of Independence. At first Gandhi voluntarily offers to officiate as their priest, but some premonition dawns upon him, and he asks them to marry: "If God wills it, I shall come. Otherwise, know my blessings always on you both. Any way you are not to put off your marriage for any reason, remember" (p.173). Gandhi has fixed their marriage for the 31st of January; on the 30th he is shot dead.

A sharper image of Gandhi and his followers is provided by the angry out-burst of a desperate carter. The shouts and general riotous behaviour of the crowd frightens his pair of bullocks drawing a load of hay down the road. The carter swears at the disturbances and remarks: "These politicians, Gandhifolk, they won't leave anyone in peace" (p.71). Earlier, Sriram's grandmother holds that Gandhi is one "who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police" (p.41).
Narayan has perhaps exploited a purely private incident, in an altered form, of course, for the scheme of the novel, but the achievement is less than satisfying in so far as the treatment of Gandhi and his impact on the people is concerned. The novel also seems to be a modified version of Narayan's earlier story "Gandhi's appeal" in which Gandhi makes a speech and calls for contributions, but it is the comical situation which develops between the husband and the wife that makes the story. They had determinedly warned each other not to go to the meeting for fear of being unable to resist Gandhi's appeal for funds; and when each returns depleted ___she without her jewels and he without his fifty rupees____ both having gone to swell Gandhi's haul ____ each has the comfort of flinging an "I told you so" at the other.  

All the same, the picture of the Mahatma that emerges in the novel does justice to Gandhi's concern for the untouchables, the children to whom he gives away the oranges, and to Sriram's granny about whom he has heard and whose permission he insists Sriram must take before joining him. Since Gandhi meant differently to different people, he did not fail any of them: "Sriram waits on him for permission to marry Bharati. Godse waits for him with pistol in hand. A sub-continent waited in the confident hope that he will bring Swaraj for its millions. He did not fail any of them".

17 Gandhi's son Devdas fell in love with Lakshmi, the daughter of C. Rajgopalachari. The illustrious fathers agreed to sanction the union if the young folks still wanted one another after five years of separation. The lovers waited until they were married on June 16, 1933.

18 Kantak in Literature of the Past Fifty Years, pp.139-40.

Waiting for the Mahatma is, thus, a significant novel in which Narayan is, more than any other novelist, concerned not only with Gandhi's image but also with the portraiture of his followers. Gandhi's image as a Mahatma persists throughout, although Gandhi as a character is not treated dexterously. Gandhi is too big a character for Narayan to handle in a comedy. Words attributed to the Mahatma have a ring of authenticity in their approximation to the actual words used by Gandhi. The chief merit of the book, however, is the insight Narayan offers in the private life of the Mahatma who considers every human being as worthy of due notice. Gandhi found time to respond personally to every letter written to him and this is evident from his relationships with Bharati and Sriram. Gandhi emerges as a warm-hearted patriarch who seems to be ever willing to partake of the sufferings and joys of all who approach him. This lends the novel a distinct place in Gandhian literature.

The Sweet Vendor (1967), despite its ostensible theme of generation gap or misplaced parental love, echoes the degeneration of Gandhian ethos in the presentation of its central character Jagan, the sweet vendor, painted in colour with details of physical appearances, habits, mood and thought-process. The growing lack of communication between the indulgent father and the spoilt son leads to the inevitable clash which is probably meant to convey the suggestion that the post-Independence generation, as represented by Mali, with its zealous adoption of modern technology has rejected Gandhian values, and that the followers of Gandhi, like Jagan, are eccentric faddists and hence pale copies of their mentor. As a comic genius, Narayan
assiduously keeps close to the surface reality, and his talent excludes from his picture such aspects of reality as are not susceptible to comic treatment.

Jagan, a prosperous sweet-vendor, leads a life of austerity based on Gandhian ideals. His only son Mali manages to go to America for higher studies but returns three years later with Grace, an American girl (half Korean) as his wife. He has a grandiose scheme of manufacturing a 'novel-writing machine'. The Americanised young man wants his rich father to finance his project but Jagan is simply disillusioned with his Westernised son and his immoral ways. The old man parts company with his son and buys a ruined garden and shrine in which Jagan plans to get a figure of the goddess Gayatri installed. His austere living ends in renunciation when he retreats to his garden with his cheque-book, leaving his business for Mali to take over. Before Jagan renounces the world, he is informed of Mali's arrest under the prohibition laws sponsored by Gandhi but Jagan refuses to be involved in the sordid affairs.

The novel apparently brings a radical and baffling newness in the younger generation into sharp conflict with Gandhian values. Mali stands for historical change and development, whereas Jagan continues to model his life on Gandhian principles. Narayan treats Gandhi incidentally as he seems to be primarily concerned with the comic treatment of paradox in Jagan, the Gandhite.

At fifty-five, Jagan's appearance is "slight and elfish, his brown skin was translucent, his brow receded gently into a walnut shade of baldness". His chin is covered with whitening bristles as" he shaved only at certain intervals, feeling
that to view oneself daily in a mirror was an intolerable
European habit." Ever since Gandhi visited the town over twenty
years ago, he has worn khadder spun by his own hands and put on
non-violent footwear. Jagan leads almost an auster and ascetic
life with his refrain of conquering self and living simply. The
comicality of his 'austerity' is brought into focus by his
nefarious practice of maintaining 'double accounts': one for
official inspection and the other of 'free cash' without any
reference to tax, since Gandhi, he claims, has given no specific
instructions for it.

A staunch advocate of Nature cure, Jagan will drink no
more than four ounces of water a day, boiled at night and cooled
in a jug open to the sky. His magnum opus, a book of "Nature
Cure and Natural Diet" is in the press. Socks, he believes,
interfere with the free circulation of blood and cause troubles.
His house is fitted with ten watt bulbs so that the light is easy
for the human retina. He is opposed to the use of a tooth brush.
A twig from a margosa tree would be an ideal brush for him. It
is impossible "to disentangle the sources of his theories and
say what he owed to Mahatma" (p.19).

Besides being a braggart and a liar, Jagan is a hypocritical
oddity. In spite of his seeming naivete, Jagan is clever by half.
An implacable foe of sugar in personal life, he has all along
fattened on the gains of sweets. His frequent observation that

Subsequent references pertain to this edition of the novel and
will appear in the text.
he has carried his trade in national interest that of providing pure, unadulterated sweets for the children of the country is pure bilge and moral duplicity. Likewise, his repeated protestation that but for his concern for his old employees or his country's welfare or service, he would have closed his shop long back is a downright lie. He would not mind his son living with Grace clandestinely elsewhere; but under his own roof it is much too much for his carefully-kept facade of respectability. His hypocrisy is so deeply-ingrained that his adherence to Gandhian principles is just a smoke screen: "Jagan is a bundle of contradictions, a professed Gandhite whose high-minded Gandhian principles are soon found to be a smoke screen". 21

Narayan seems to be repeating what he has earlier suggested in Waiting for the Mahatma that Gandhian struggle is a convenient refuge for the vagrant in life. Feeling heroic in a mood of reminiscences, Jagan would often brood that he had left the College when Gandhi gave a call for non-co-operation. He had, therefore, spent the best part of his student years in prison. Jagan would conveniently slur over the fact that he had failed several times in B.A., ceased to attend the College and had begun to take his examinations as a private candidate long before the call of Gandhi. He had confessed in an informal banter with his wife that his repeated failures were due to his lack of interest in studies and Gandhi had nothing to do with it as it is made clear in the following conversation:

"If I have been failing it is because I don't believe education is important, that is all". "Your mother

remarked that, being uneducated myself I want to drag you down to my own level". "Why don't you put your fingers into your ears whenever Mother talks in that strain?" "Why don't you use your intelligence and pass your examination?". "Yes, that is a good idea" (p.157).

The novelist has exploited his gift of comic playfulness and exaggeration to delineate the 'double standards' of Jagan who proclaims that his generation came under the spell of Gandhi and hence "could do no wring" (p.38). He wants his son Mali to emulate his philosophy of simple living and high thinking, as Gandhi had taught them, but he would not let his son and the only child to handle his money. He reads Bhagavad Gita every day but would let his wealth "accumulate and grow". He renounces the world in sheer disgust but must carry his cheque-book and Charkha with him. He had joined Gandhian struggle and rubbed shoulders with Untouchables but he cannot accept Grace (half-Korean and half-American) as his daughter-in-law.

Jagan proclaims to have come under the spell of Gandhi but he has not cared to imbibe the true meaning of Satyagraha or even non-violence: "There are times when a Satyagrahi has to act first and think afterwards" (p.124). He has cultivated the knack to ascribe even the commonplace tips of human conduct to the message of Gandhi: "At first don't hurry; but when you decide, be swift and positive" (p.123). That is more or less what he has learnt from Gandhi, but the lesson seems to have worn out. He remembers how, as a volunteer, over twenty years ago, he had rushed into the British Collector's bungalow and climbed up the roof in order to bring down the Union Jack and plant the Indian Flag in its place. They had to beat him and crack open his skull
in order to make him let go his hold: "He opened his eyes fifteen days later in the hospital, and lay forgotten in a prison afterwards" (p.124).

Narayan has focussed his comic vision on the fun arising out of the absurdity of Jagan's innate beliefs and antics, viewed against the requirements of sanity. It is his sense of humour that makes this sweet vendor a lively character. Sundaram argues that Narayan's admiration for Gandhi cannot be questioned but the novelist can hear and see what lots of people say and do in Gandhi's name, and can present them as they are, without anger or bitterness. The argument seems to be far-fetched and superimposed as the text does not warrant it. In his exuberance for comic view of the so-called Gandhites, Narayan has relegated Gandhi to a superficial treatment. No earnest attempt is made to assess the relevance of Gandhi in the changed social set-up. Narayan has made a prosaic use of Gandhi merely to render his narrative playful, ironical and gently mocking. One wishes that the problem of faith of people owing allegiance to Gandhian ideals were spared the sketchy treatment!

In conclusion, we may remark that Narayan treats Gandhi as a major character enjoying immense popularity among the masses in Waiting for the Mahatma and examines Gandhi and his ideology in terms of his imbecile followers in The Vendor of Sweets. The period portrayed by Narayan possessed a kind of dynamism that forced a reflection of Gandhi in his writings, but Narayan betrays his inability to comprehend Gandhi and his social significance. Gandhi

22 Narayan, p.139.
is presented as a queer blend of warm-hearted, genial, persuasive human being and a vivacious or a dramatic character who looks like a tyrannical school master, more comical than tyrannical. The idiosyncrasies attributed to the Mahatma lend this character a distinct individuality invested with chuckling sort of humour, but there is no consummate artistry behind the image and the impression he produces on the reader. Characterisation lacks the touch of imagination and authenticity, and the historicity of the Gandhian image is not unimpeachable. It seems that Narayan has drafted Gandhi in the tale without any depth of characterisation. The burden of Narayan's tale is on the ironical portrayal of the response of average Indians to Gandhi's thought and philosophy, and it is suggested that people did not understand Gandhi or his message. The novelist has crammed indiscriminately Gandhi's notable pronouncements into the text but the book gives no insight into Gandhi or his ideology.

Narayan has marshalled certain familiar habits, characteristics and incidents associated with Gandhi but the treatment is casual. He gives a pedestrian delineation of Gandhian impact on the masses. The 'Quit India' movement and Gandhi's role is given a sketchy treatment, but Gandhi's concern for untouchables is dealt with quite convincingly. Narayan also refers to the degeneration of Gandhian ethos in the post-Independence period. It is suggested that the new generation has rejected Gandhian values, and the followers of Gandhi are eccentric faddists and pale copies of their mentor. Their adherence to Gandhian principles is merely a smoke screen to cover up their duplicity. Either Narayan fails to grasp Gandhi and his social significance or he deliberately projects Gandhi and his followers in ludicrous colours. The
The redeeming feature of Narayan's treatment of Gandhi is the portraiture of Gandhi in his private dealings with his ordinary followers. Gandhi is affectionate, warm and even indulgent to his camp-followers and he takes a loving interest in their personal problems. He finds time from his busy schedule to attend to their correspondence with him personally. This image of Gandhi is in keeping with the written record of the Mahatma. Narayan treats Gandhi in a straightforward manner when he presents these individuals in relation to the Mahatma, although the novelist takes care to show that Gandhi's extraordinary influence dwarfs all his associates.

Another merit of Narayan's handling of the Gandhian theme lies in his observation that a large section of people failed to comprehend Gandhi fully, although they pretended to be his sincere disciples.