

## **R. K. NARAYAN AND HISTORY: A NOTE ON SWAMI AND FRIENDS (1935) AND WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA (1955)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

R.K. Narayan is a pure artist who doesn't go into contemporaneity too deeply to create piece which are mere period literature. He is a realist with a wide range. His realism is not the realism of an exact reproduction of external realities. He does not handle events and feelings in the way in which other writers handle them. This paper is a study of the two novels of Narayan touch quite specifically on the struggle for freedom. One is the first novel he produced, before independence, Swami and Friends, and the other a novel he produced after independence: Waiting for the Mahatma. The first novel presents Swami as a boy who responds to the struggle boyishly, and contributes his mite to it by throwing his khaddar Gandhi cap into the bonfire for foreign clothes. It presents the thoughtlessness of the boys and many other participants and their failure to continue with their activities in a more responsible way. Waiting for the Mahatma is a more serious work. It presents the story of Sriram the adolescent who falls in love and through that develops into a freedom fighter. He passes through a Gandhian phase into a violent phase and finally gets back into the Gandhian fold. Narayan presents Sriram in a piquant interaction with a whiteman who says that he feels that he feels like an Indian and therefore doesn't want to go back to England.

**KEYWORDS:** R. K. Narayan and History

### **INTRODUCTION**

R.K. Narayan was born in 1907. When the country became free, he was thirty – eight. When he published his first novel in 1935, he was an eyewitness to the freedom struggle and all its variety; the sword less and bloodless war that Gandhiji led, and the struggle that others believed in with sword and bloodshed. It was a hectic period. But when one reads the novels and short stories of Narayan, one finds that he does not involve himself in the presentation of these exciting events. He concentrates on presenting the life of the common people. He rarely presents a character who is dazzling. There are many who are great successes (like Margayya of the The Financial Expert and even Railway Raju of The Guide) but they are not heroes in the conventional sense. He is not for the public excitement and the public intensity. He presents the vicissitudes in the lives of the average or less than average people. If great people come into their lives, they are only incidental presences, not the main characters.

Speaking of Jane Austen, some critic remarks that to read her novels, one would never suspect that she is a contemporary of Sir Walter Scott who created the historical novel and concentrated on the far away and long ago, and that hers was the period of the French Revolution. She immerses herself in the domesticities of her characters and limits herself severely to the world that she knows very intimately. Sometimes Narayan invites comparison with Jane Austen. He, like her, shuns the public spectacle and its intensities. He is all for the private individual. Sometimes, they are affected by the great public events. Sriram is sucked into the freedom struggle, but his inspiration is a girl. In one of his short stories

Narayan presents a young man who dies in a communal clash.

But yet Narayan is not all Jane Austen. His private individual can be a subject for cool ridicule and satire who nevertheless develops and becomes a round character instead of remaining a flat character (Sriram of *Waiting for the Mahatma*); he can be the victim of deep personal conflicts (Easwaran); he can be character in a farce (*The Talkative Man*); above everything, he can be a very real presentation of an average person whose life is yet part of a strange and intense experience (the protagonist of "Uncle") or a very real presentation of a character of aberrations (Subbiah of "Half – a – rupee Worth"). Such characters appear in his novels and in his short stories. Narayan is also interested in characters with special interests and special genius (Rosie of *The Guide* and Selvi of "Selvi" and the child in "The Child Artist", and he is interested in inspired crooks also (Raju of *The Guide*). It is difficult to list the variety in R.K. Narayan.

Yes, one notes that Narayan is not interested in presenting the bustle of great movements and their impact on the lives of people. But no writer escapes his times and writes from a vacuum. Narayan also responds to the times. Only, he does not make that response the central theme of his novels. The freedom struggle makes its presence felt in *Kanthapura* (1938) of Raju Rao (1908-). Contemporary social realities glitter in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand (1904-). Such things do not occupy the centre of stage in the works of Narayan: not in their way. But in his long life, he sees things changing, the spirit changing, and he captures them faithfully enough – as for instance in *The painter of Signs* (1977), where he presents the new woman who wants to be herself, without bonds of family and society, and of family planning and new dams coming up.

The way he touches history is something interesting. In what Jane Austen called the bow-wow style of her contemporary Walter Scott, the great events and the great personalities appear in all their greatness (and may be in some of their smallness also). In Raja Rao *Mahatma Gandhi's* is an inspiration not only for Moorthy but also for the common workers of the Coffee Estate and the downtrodden men of the area. Raja Rao seeks to present the alchemy of Gandhiji: he touches the clay of kathapura and turns it into gold – though the dross remains just outside the periphery. But the realism of Narayan, informing the spirit of his unique style of comedy, sees the underbelly of the great movement. He shows the weak links of the movement. The excitement that a great movement generates is something difficult to characterize. How many of the frenzied or excited mobs understand the real questions involved in the whole process? To present this aspect of reality requires courage. Narayan does it both before independence, when the great movement is at its height, and when it is all over and cool retrospection replaces popular inspiration and the euphoria that goes with it.

In *Swami and Friends*, the freedom struggle and the general atmosphere appear as part of Swami's adventures and misadventures. The first element that makes its appearance is the arrival of Rajam in First A of Albert Mission School. When he walks in all the influence of the British Raj walks in too: and all the paraphernalia that British rule had imposed on India – even on the Indian children.

Rajam was a fresh arrival in the First A. He had sauntered into the class on the reopening day of the Second Term, walked up to the last bench, sat beside Mani, and felt very comfortable indeed till Mani gave him a jab in the ribs, which he returned. He had impressed the whole class on the very first day. He was a new-comer: he dressed very well—he was the only boy in the class who wore socks and shoes, fur cap and tie, and a wonderful coat and knickers. He came to the school in a car. As well as all this, he proved to be a very good student too. There were vague rumours that he had come from

some English boys' school somewhere in Madras. He spoke very good English. "Exactly like a 'European'". This meant that few in the school could make out what he said. (SF. Pp.13-14)

Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent: all the prestige of the father goes with him. He has an air-gun presented to him on his birthday and he is able to outbully the bully of the school. Mani, he comes to school by car, and his dress is meticulously according to prescription: cap, coat and knickers and shoes. In those ancient days, all formal dress had to be perfectly European or perfectly national: even for school boys! He belongs to the upper crust of society – fluent and anglicized in his English, English in his dress, and the natural leader of the Malgudi Cricket Club (yes, the MCC!)

And then the Freedom Struggle reaches Malgudi. Two thousand people gather on the right bank of the Sarayu to protest against the arrest of a prominent social worker in Bombay. The speaker rants about the glorious past of the country and the ignominious present. What he says is not completely intelligible to Swami and Mani who attend the meeting: for instance he says that "We are slaves of slaves." He asks his audience why the great nation is now reduced to this plight. Then he tells them: "It is the bureaucracy that has made us so, by intimidation and starvation. You need not do more. Let every Indian spit on England, and the quantity of saliva will be enough to drown England....."

Swaminathan is inspired but he has doubts:

- Swaminathan asked: "Is it true?"
- "Which?"
- "Spitting and drowning the Europeans."
- "Must be, otherwise, do you think that fellow would suggest it?"
- "Then why not do it? It is easy."
- "Europeans will shoot us, they have no heart," said Mani. This seemed a satisfactory answer... (SF, p.94.)

The boys decide that they would wear khaddar then on. Mani assures Swami that he already wears khaddar and also assures Swami that he is not. And then there is the ritual of throwing into the fire all the foreign clothes people are wearing, and coats and caps and upper cloth come whizzing through the air. Someone tells him that his cap is foreign, and quailing with shame. Swami flings it into the fire "with a feeling that he was saving the country." (p.95.) The next morning he realizes that he couldn't go to school bareheaded. Students collect in front of the school and refuse to attend classes. All sorts of people join the student crowd. Self-appointed leaders appear. Things begin to go wrong. "Swaminathan was an unobserved atom in the crowd. Another unobserved atom was busily piling up small stones before him, and flinging them with admirable aim at the panes in the front part of the school building. Swaminathan could hardly help following his example." (pp.97- 98.) The crowd moves on to the Board School which has not closed yet, and stop work there successfully. The headmaster of the school is shouted down. When some boys stand apart, they are dragged into the crowd. Swami pleases himself with bullying the infant classes. Then the crowd is intercepted by the police: under the command of Rajam's father and when there is a lath charge Swami runs away after a tap on the head by a policeman who calls him a mischievous monkey. That evening Swami is happy to hear his father condemning the police action and the Deputy Superintendent who led it, and tries to solve his cap problem taking advantage of this moment. He tells his father that somebody pulled off his cap and tore it to bits because it was foreign, and father tells him that he is an idiot to have let such a thing happen because he had bought it from the khadi shop for two rupees!

After the entire bustle, school resumes. The headmaster reads out the names of the few students who had attended class on the day and the names of those who had not. He asks the truants the reason for their absence, and he is not satisfied with their improvisations. Swami is proved to have broken the widow panes of the headmaster's room and the headmaster tells him that he is going to dismiss him from the school. Swami has a sudden access of courage and he walks out of the school saying that he doesn't want to continue in the school.

This presentation is not to be misconstrued as a British – loyalist's unfavorable presentation of a phase of the freedom struggle. We have to bear in mind the fact that when the proposal to invite students to leave educational institutions to fight for the freedom of the country, the moderates of Indian politics cautioned Gandhiji that it could misfire in course of item. Later the technique of satyagraha became an evil tool in the hands of professional political agitators. Also, it has to be remembered that most of the people who joined the struggle could have been just people who drifted into it. That does not amount to denying the genuineness of the struggle or the bonafides of the many who participated in the struggle with conviction. As a boy, Swami does not understand the significance of the struggle. Along with him are many others. This is reality.

Waiting for the Mahatma is a different kind of story. Of course, it starts with Sriram being no better than a schoolboy in his idea of the world outside his house. When he sees Bharati for the first time he has no idea of becoming a freedom fighter. He empties his pockets into her collection box and goes home remembering her face. Later he meets her in the meeting that Gandhiji addresses. She sees her going on the stage and singing songs of prayer and patriotism. He falls for her. Then he follows her about until at last he finds her in the vicinity of Gandhiji's hut.

This novel was written and published after independence, and so it is not like *Swami and Friends* which was written and published before independence. But it deals with the time before independence, and touches the great event – independence – and the death of the Mahatma a few months later.

When Sriram goes to attend the meeting to be addressed by the mahatma, he finds a sea of people. Looking at them, he concludes the local khaddar shop should have done a roaring business in Gandhi caps. That has become the roaring fashion! Also. Independence may be round the corner, some suspect, and therefore try to mingle patriotism and loyalty to the British government. Mr. Natesh the Municipal Chairman is one of those. He offers his bungalow for the residence of Gandhiji during his visit but is greatly disappointed when Gandhiji chooses to stay in a hut. The atmosphere of the meeting is presented: there is spirit in the people but it has to be cajoled out of them. Sriram does not readily join the prayer song because he feels much too self-conscious. Natesh translates Gandhiji's Hindi speech into Tamil. There are cynical remarks about Natesh's exercise in running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. Sriram attends the next day's meeting also. He begins to feel very critical of many things when he hears Gandhiji's speech. For instance, he becomes very critical of Granny's practice of untouchability. Narayan describes the atmosphere in the meeting of common people whose reactions are mixed and whose participation in the follow up to the meetings might not be very good. But there are devoted workers from whom he learns the history of India and of Gandhiji's movement.

When he manages to catch Bharati's eye and joins the movement because of her fascination for him, he is just the average or less than average boy that he has already been. But something happens to him when Bharati teaches him to spin the charka and he abandons home without personally talking about it to Granny. Then the austerities of his secluded life near the temple on the hill make more of a satyagrahi.

Bharati meets him at his mountain seclusion and gives him the instructions of Mahatma Gandhi. Eventually he wanders about with a tin of paints the Quit India slogan on all the large walls he finds in villages. He talks to village shopkeepers and villagers about the Swadeshi movement and the reception is mixed. He takes the life out of a village provision merchant who has foreign biscuits to sell. But he meets more than his match when he goes to meet an English estate owner. He goes there with the expectation of provoking the Englishman to excesses of abuse and all humiliating behavior. But the Estate Owner receives him with respect, and gives him a cup of lime juice and talks to him about the Quit India demand. He tells Sriram that having been in this country for decades, he feels that he is an Indian too. When Sriram leaves he realizes that it is not a very simple question. Narayan takes the trouble thus to display various sides of the question.

And then he happens to meet a person who is wedded to violent struggle for independence. Jagdish, a radio mechanic, tells him that the backbone of the British must be smashed and that it lies "in the courts and schools and offices and railway lines, from these she draws the strength for her survival." (p.113.) When he wonders what the Mahatma will say about their activities, Jagdish tells him that eventually he would condone all this when the result is desirable. Later, there is news that Sriram's granny is seriously sick. Since he knows that the police are on the look out for him, he goes to his house in the disguise of a common man. His granny is supposed to be dead, and she is removed to the cremation ground and Sriram goes there to cremate her. There it is discovered that granny is not really dead, and she is taken to a nearby mandap for rest. But Sriram is arrested and is sent to jail.

When Sriram gets out of jail, he is changed person. He goes to see Bharati and goes to Delhi after her. He meets her. She is in the thick of the movement to help the countless refugees from Pakistan. He meets Gandhiji with Bharati, and Gandhiji gives them the green signal for their marriage, and tells them that the next day he would himself solemnize their marriage. But unfortunately that evening that he is assassinated.

Narayan mentions the many aspects of Gandhiji's work for the nation. Sriram's education is the education of the man who does not know much about the freedom struggle. This novel is perhaps the best novel that illustrates the transformation of an average individual under the great leadership of Gandhiji. Sriram is transformed thus. But there are others with different points of view. There are also many who are just not touched by the movement and its great ideals which embrace all life. But all through passes the comic-satirist's persistent vision of the other side. There is no exaggeration of the spirit of nationalism. Gandhiji's surrounded by many who are idealists like him and are practical workers like him. But there are others who are not so selfless. There are people like Natesh the Municipal Chairman. The ideals of Gandhiji are mimicked and parodied by later politicians. Narayan provides us with cues for this development.

Narayan was born decades before independence, and published his first few books before independence. Yet he did not write exclusively on this all-important phase modern Indian experience. He did not ignore that phase of modern Indian life and yet he did not overdo it.

Two novels of Narayan touch quite specifically on the struggle for freedom. One is the first novel he produced, before independence, *Swami and Friends*, and the other a novel he produced after independence: *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Narayan is an artist who does not want to fragmentalize and falsify the great national movement. It has many aspects and many workers, and therefore there were many manifestations of it. And it was not as though the Gandhian style of fighting was the only style of fighting in those days. Narayan makes no secret of all this. He sees clearly the individual's role in

great public movements, and he sees all movements and governments as totalities composed of the many individuals. His greatness is that he does not lose sight of the woods for the trees nor of the trees for the woods.

Narayan is a writer who refuses to be swept off his feet by popular enthusiasms. As a writer of comedy, and as a satirist, he sees the whole of a process and gives an honest picture of reality in his own way. He is not interested in denigration or in exaltation.

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