



PORTRAYAL OF MOORTHY IN *KANTHAPURA* AND SRIRAM IN *WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA* AS 'GANDHIAN HEROES': A BRIEF APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This article portrays two Gandhian Heroes, Moorthy in *Kanthapura* and Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, where Moorthy transform the life of an entire community from the bondage of high bound orthodoxy to struggle and sacrifice for an ideal and how Sriram transforms himself through the Impact of Gandhi which is transmitted through Bharathi. It also projects the fact that as an Indo-Anglian novelists. R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao are profoundly influenced by Gandhian idealism and that is reflected through their works.

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INTRODUCTION

Gandhi being the subject matter of several of Indo-Anglian novels is projected almost as a recurring presence in modern literature and has been treated as an idea, a myth, a symbol and also a benevolent human being. As N.N.Banerji puts it, "the Indo-Anglian novelists have been profoundly influenced by Gandhi and his ideals. R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and *Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* may be cited as good examples for projection of Gandhian idealism and portrayal of 'Gandhian hero'. In his article on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, C.D.Narasimaiah asserts: "No book of this scope and size that I have read in English on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership; its religious character, its economic and social concerns, its political ideals, precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualize politics, the capacity for sacrifice of our people in response to the call of one like Gandhi" (P 40). K.R.S.Iyengar describes *Kanthapura* as a "Gandhipurana" for though Gandhi's god-like presence is not visible anywhere, he operates behind everybody's thoughts

and deeds. His spirit pervades the whole story. The novel is a tale sharing Gandhi's charismatic effect on a small obscure village, *Kanthapura* which responds wonderfully to his call for non-cooperation. The Mahatma is not directly presented as one of the characters in the novel but the entire action is sustained by his spirit. "As a careful artist seeking to avoid melodrama and sentimentality, Raja Rao does not make the mistake of introducing Gandhiji directly as a character in the novel" (Verghese 145). The author creates an idealized character Moorthy, after the image of Gandhiji. In the words of G.P.Sharma, "Raja Rao's Moorthy is more distinct and more real and more of an active leader with a definite programme of the movement before him" (P 214). Raja Rao of the thirties has been projected in Moorthy. In the words of J.P.Sharma, "Moorthy is certainly Raja Rao in mind and aspirations". Moorthy is depicted as a young man of noble character giving up his college education so as to follow Gandhi. At college, he feels the full force of Gandhi and walks out of college as a Gandhiman. He does not have any personal contact with Gandhi, yet he is said to have had a 'vision' of Gandhi. In his very first view of the Mahatma, Moorthy feels; "... the very skin of the Mahatma seemed to send out a mellowed force and love" (*Kanthapura* 52). He leaves college, returns to his native village *Kanthapura* and tries to preach Gandhism to the uneducated villagers of

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Kanthapura. The people's initial reaction to Gandhian thought is one of the bored apathy. When young Moorthy visits the parish quarters, the comment of the Brahmin widow, who is the narrator, is,

"... he is one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family, and yet they pray like us and they live like us. Only they say too, one should not marry early, one should allow widows to take husbands and a Brahmin might marry a Pariah and a Pariah a Brahmin. Well, well, let them say it, how does it affect us? We shall be dead before the world is polluted. We shall have closed our eyes" (P 19). But the shrewd Moorthy knows that the master-key to the rustic Indian mind is religion. He gauges rightly that the only way of delivering Gandhi's message to his own people is through religion. So he organizes religious functions at the Kanthapuri Shwry Temple which is the nerve centre of the village. "He puts the new Gandhian wine into the age-old bottle of ancient 'Harikatha' and this in doctrines the Kanthapurians" (Naik 27). The 'Harikatha' is mostly about Gandhi who like Krishna is opposed to evil. Through this familiar and effective means of bhajans and "Harikatha Kalashepams", Moorthy tries to infuse nationalism into the minds of the uneducated Kanthapurians. The slumbering village hums with activity only after the consecration and installation of the half-sunk "Linga" by Moorthy. Though the orthodox men and women of the village raise a great hue and cry against Moorthy's austere practice of the Gandhian philosophy, he is firm in his stand. The Swami, the custodian of the Sanathana Dharma and Bhatta, the village priest-cum-money lender, threaten to excommunicate the whole Brahmin community residing in the village. They threaten Moorthy with excommunication if he persists in his Gandhian activities. Moorthy's widowed mother commits suicide out of shame at her son's behaviour. But Moorthy has chosen this life after "experiencing the vision of Gandhi, who electrifies, as it were, his whole being with the message of truth and love" (Rao 28) So he is undaunted and continues his work with more vigour and determination. Though he is excommunicated, he remains firm in his decision. Even from his childhood, Moorthy has won the love and affection of all the villagers. He is "as honest as an elephant" (18) and "a deep-voiced, God-loving person" (Raja Rao, 51).

Though Moorthy's Gandhian way of living-that is going from house to house, visiting all the quarters of the village including the Sudra and the Pariah quarter and advising people to throw off caste-shock many of the villagers, he still wins the heart of all. Once the villagers are convinced that the Mahatma is right in the tradition of the Hindu avatars, they plunge wholeheartedly into the freedom struggle. Moorthy exactly puts in practice whatever is said by the Mahatma. Therefore the people of Kanthapura village begin to regard him as the Mahatma himself. Patel Range Gowda, whose words were law in the village says, "You are our Gandhi" (Kanthapura 109). To the people of Kanthapura, Gandhi is the mountain and Moorthy is the small mountain. To them, Gandhi himself is an incarnation of Shiva and Moorthy is more or less the incarnation of an incarnation. He is referred to as "the saint of our village" and "our Gandhi" and is endearingly known as Moorthappa by everybody. Moorthy has been described by the narrator as "a noble cow, quiet, generous, serene, deferent and brahminic, a very prince..." (Kanthapura 119). The people are loyal to Gandhi only at the second remove, first they offer their loyalty to Moorthy. He is believed to be an 'avatar' by

the villagers. He mixes with the Pariahs, inns over the village Patel, and gets the sympathy and support of the enlightened Rengamma and Ratna. He then launches the non-violent, non-cooperation movement as part of Gandhi's national agitation. The whole village was "shaken like a leaf in the August wind" (Joshi 49).

Moorthy is a Satyagrahi in the right sense of the word. To remain non-violent when faced with violence needs a lot of control on the part of a Satyagrahi. Moorthy has this in abundance, for he has all the virtues of leadership, self-sacrifice, fearlessness, courage and endurance. Paul Verghese holds:

"The struggle between the Satyagrahis led by Moorthy and the police is in effect the transformation of Mahatma Gandhi's programme of Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience into action and shows Satyagraha in all its aspects" (P 144). Men and women of all castes get absorbed into the movement Moorthy is successful in receiving the fullest support of men and women of various social strata in Kanthapura because of his personal qualities; his ability to sacrifice personal comfort and luxury and his strong feeling of ordinary men. The Skeffington Coffee Estate, owned by the Europeans is notorious for its ill-treatment of the workers and its lack of minimum facilities for them. Moorthy comes to know of it and goes there to take stock of the situation. There he is beaten severely by the Estate Manager. Moorthy undertakes a three-day fast, as Gandhi had done in similar condition, for "much violence had been because of him". When he is asked to give up his fast, he is stubborn in observing it for "the fault of others is the fruit of one's own disharmony" (P90). He feels that the fast has helped to sublimate his feelings and strengthen him for the next task which is the launching of the non-violent, non-cooperation movement.

Moorthy, being spiritual, is moral on the lines of Gandhiji. He has the Gandhian fearlessness about him. As Gandhi had counseled, "service can have no meaning unless one takes pleasure in it. When it is done for show or for fear of public opinion, it stunts the man and crushes the spirit (Som Deva 35). Moorthy follows his footsteps and enjoys real pleasure in the service of the people. The darling hero of the village propagates the ideas of social reform by breaking the caste-bar taboos against inter-caste marriages and such other evils. Like Gandhi, he doesn't believe in Caste or class. In the words of C.Paul Verghese, "Moorthy's struggle is not only with the tyranny of alien rule as symbolized in Bade Khan, the police, but also with the tyranny of casteism in the village as well as with the exploitation of the poor by men like Bhatta who stands for usury and pseudo-orthodoxy" (144). Moorthy, throughout his stay in the village carries on a brave fight against these. He visits the Pariah quarters, eats their food and becomes friendly with them. Though the Brahmins of the village are shocked at this and Moorthy's mother herself dies of shame, he does not flinch. He works for the low and the lowly with all the courage one needs for the social work. The Pariahs look upon him as an 'avatar' and co-operate with him in all his activities. To them, Moorthy is their local Gandhi Mahatma.

Moorthy also helps to spread the Congress ideals of reconstruction of notional economy by initiating spinning in the village and making many his followers. Keeping in touch with the Congress Committee, he organizes the villagers

according to the Congress Principles; distributing spinning wheel and cotton free from the Congress and exhorting them to put on their homespun Khaddar only. Gandhi preached religious tolerance. This social philosophy of Gandhi is also shared by Moorthy for he abandons riches and remains unmarried throughout his life. To all and sundry, he preaches brotherhood, equality, castelessness and abolition of untouchability, one can visualize such a good deal of idealization in the character of Moorthy that, he may be considered as 'a Gandhian hero in all respects. Unlike Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan looks at the political movement of Indian struggle for Independence through the glasses of humanist. The theme of *Waiting for the Mahatma* is based on the romantic love of Sriram and Bharati. Though Gandhi appears as a central character in the novel, the author is for more effective only in his initial characterization of Sriram. The story of the novel is narrated through the point of view of Sriram, who at the beginning is a pampered youth, unrefined and ignorant, spoilt by his grandmother's care and a huge sum of unearned money. At first, it is not Gandhi but an enchanting, unpredictable girl who attracts Sriram towards a new set of values. He first meets Bharathi in the market place and is impressed by her beauty. He meets her again on the platform during Gandhi's first public meeting in Malgudi. Sriram is attracted towards Gandhi and the national movement but more towards Bharathi who stands gracefully near Gandhi on the platform. He makes Bharathi's acquaintance and decides to become a Gandhian in order to win her. He joins Gandhi's encourage and learns the first lesson that "suffering and self-motification" are the order of the day in the camp. Dissemination of the message of the Mahatma is the allotted duty of Sriram.

R.K.Narayan tries to idealize the character of the hero whose interest in the national issue invariably remains subsidiary to his interest in Bharati. He tells Gandhiji frankly that he has joined the camp for he would like to be "where Bharati is" (WFM 46). The muddle-headed hero gradually comes under the spell of the Mahatma and begins to identify himself with the cause, but it is not the result of his own inner conviction or his own devotion for the Mahatma. At the root of his nationalistic zeal, there is only an infatuation with Bharathi who believes in Gandhi's ways and ideals. Doubts and questions often assail him and he does not fully comprehend either Gandhi or Gandhism. M.K.Naik writes:

"Indian readers miss the subtle irony which underlines the picture of the impact of Gandhiji on the hero, Sriram. Sriram is a very unheroic hero. This makes him a typical specimen of the common educated Indian and his response to Gandhiji" (P 60).

A clinching proof of Sriram's moronic incomprehension is the way he is taken in by Jegadish, a prosperous photographer and a terrorist leader. Under his leadership, Sriram indulges in terrorist activities against all Gandhian principles. He over runs, trains, sets fire to buildings and performs other acts of destruction with as much enthusiasm as he had shown for spinning, for non-violent picketing and for writing slogans on the wall. Sriram's lack of understanding of the Gandhian spirit coupled with his enthusiasm for the cause create a humorous situation. When the "Quite India" resolution is passed, Sriram like others goes on scrawling this slogan on the walls and trees. He comes to a large British Estate at the gate-post of which he paints "Quite India". Sriram talks to people about

'ahimsa' but he feels "the whole thing is extremely false" (P 67). Later when he offers Satyagraha before the shop of a small shopkeeper who sells foreign biscuits, he realizes the futility of his endeavours. When he tries to explain his view to the people, the situation becomes funny and Sriram is frustrated by the wall of incomprehension which separates him from the people. He wonders if all his sacrifice is worth the trouble, R.K.Narayan writes:

"In a flash there passed before his mind Gandhi, his spinning wheel, the hours he spent in walking, thinking, and mortifying himself in various ways, his imprisonment, all this seemed suddenly pointless All his own activity seemed to him meaningless ... what did it matter whether the shop men sold British biscuits or Scandinavian ones or Chinese crackers or French butter? ... He felt suddenly weary" (*Waiting for the Mahatma* 83-84).

His enthusiasm for the freedom of the country is condensed into a shortened tail of the 'Q' in the slogan "Quite India" written on the wall. The Proliferation of the Gandhian ideal in the deep interiors of South India is seen through amusing little incidents that happen to Sriram. Throughout the novel, it is obvious that he has not understood what the whole non-violent, non-cooperation movement is about. "His is an inferior path – the path of blind obedience" (Parameswaran 67). That a large section of the Indian public did not understand Gandhian idealism properly in spite of their earnest enthusiasm gets symbolized in the character of Sriram. To conclude, it may be said that in *Kanthapura*, Gandhi's impact conveyed through Moorthy does transform the life of an entire community from the bondage of high bound orthodoxy to struggle and sacrifice for an ideal whereas in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. "the impact of Gandhi transmitted through Bharathi changes the whole life of Sriram, bringing him out of the swung somnolence of pampered adolescence" (Mukerjee 40).

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