

Socio-Cultural Crisis In R.K.Narayan's "Waiting For The Mahatma": An Analysis

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ABSTRACT: *Cultural crisis refers to an incident that leads to a dangerous situation affecting individual and society as a whole. Since culture has a varied connotation varying from personal to the collective frame of life, cultural crisis may also appear in different fields like education, politics, human resource, management etc. Under the British Raj and after the new found independence India had to completely redefine herself culturally followed by the greatest partition in the history of mankind between India and Pakistan. Socio cultural conflict is one of the perennial themes in Indo Anglican fiction. R.K.Narayan depicts the clash of deep rooted values of Indian culture characterized by Hindu culture with those of modern West in many of his novels.*

Keywords: *crisis, connotation, Indo-Anglican, clash, depict*

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan is one of the most celebrated novelists in English. He is one of the pioneer innovators and moulders of Indian Aesthetic sensibility, reality and psychological axis and timechisels the growth and maturity of the characters while the society remains melodramatic, Tragicomic and telescoped into a local parochial dimension. The novelist's sense of narration is replete with objectivity, a quaint and curious sense of humour and irony and he keeps his finger on the anomalies and angularities of his characters with a particular point of view. His humour is overtly discernible not simple in the conception and particular of eccentric characters but also in description and dialogue. His humour is aptly woven into the texture of his prose

Waiting for the Mahatma has been scrutinized as the story of Sri Ram an idle youth of only twenty years metamorphosed into a freedom fighter by the pull and push of circumstances. The novel exemplifies of typifies Indian literary nuances with a touch of taboos and values-constituting the crux of national sensibility. R.K Narayan's novels, which involve various types of people from a fictitious town called Malgudi, are a delight to read. Waiting for the mahatma is another realistic novel set during the freedom struggle days. Surprisingly enough for the readers of Narayan he has handled a romance genre in his novel. However after reading this novel amazingly enough how will he bring out the emotions in romance as well. This novel is a stunning representation of freedom struggles movement phenomenal pattern of the archetypal images of man embedded in a sociological resurgence.

It is worthwhile to evaluate the particular pattern which Narayan employs in exploring the societal consciousness by means of his universal vision, in the social behavioral pattern, Sri Ram is critical of age-old institutional values, albeit he himself is deeply rooted in the family tradition. He revolts but returns. The theme of East West conflicts or encounter may sound irrelevant and inconsequential in the present world. But that was not the case of India as depicted by R.K Narayan was written when India was under the British. Therefore the Characters in the novel are the imprint of colonized people.

A CAREFUL STUDY OF THEME

Narayan's major characters belong to the middle class set up who try to adapt themselves to the kaleidoscopic condition of society. Sri Ram in waiting for the Mahatma is attracted more with Bharati than with money. The national intellectual's predicament is wonderfully focused in Narayan's creativity. The story of 'Waiting for the Mahatma' in a nutshell goes like this. One of the most novel novels of R.K. Narayan 'Waiting for the Mahatma' was published in 1955.the novel is woven against the unconventional backdrop of freedom movement. It murmurs the romance of Sri Ram and Bharati set against the scenario of political unrest. Mahatma here is 'Gandhiji' himself who is seen participating in the struggle as a character.

The Waiting for the Mahatma is woven around how its protagonist Sri Ram is changed from the state of ignorant and aimless youth to an acute and committed freedom fighter. At first, Sri Ram is presented a lazy and complacent of the young high school graduate living with his grandmother. He has knowledge of the condition of the country .When he is twenty, his grandmother hands over the fat same of money she had been saving in his name.

Then he came into contact with Bharati and fell into love at first sight. He met her as she was making tin collection for freedom movement. Bharati's father had been shot dead while offering Satyagraha against the British during the first non-cooperation movement. She, who was just an infant then was adopted and raised as the foster daughter of Gandhi. Bharati has no existence without Gandhi. She only symbolize Gandhi model of love non-violence and freedom. The love of Sri Ram and Bharati went on in the backyard of the struggle for independence launched by Mahatma Gandhi. But Bharati's first loyalty was towards Gandhi and the marriage could be possible only when Gandhi gave his blessing to it.

Meanwhile Sri Ram a pleasure seeking guy was totally changed into a Satyagrahi and a follower of Mahatma. He was also imprisoned for several years as punishment for derailing a train. Finally he is freed from the prison as India won independence .Thus finally Sri Ram and Bharati waited for the mahatma as the Birla temple in new Delhi to obtain his final consent for their marriage. Having received the consent they attended the prayer meeting of Gandhi, where a young man shot Gandhi dead.

Hence socio-cultural crisis is prevalent throughout the novel. All the character and their ideologies clearly indicated the prevailing crisis during the time of freedom struggle of India. Gandhi was a modern man who was educated in the Europe. His concept of democracy was derived from the Western philosophy. His weapon like Satyagraha, non- violence and civil disobedience were derived from prominent American thinkers and writer like Emerson and Thoreau. He was influenced by French Revolution as well. Hence it's true to say that India's

struggle for Independence is the effect of modern concept of democracy. The people of India were oppressed by the colonial government. Thus the novel represent to socio- cultural crisis.

Sri Ram, the protagonist was an orphan. His mother and father died long back. He had his mother's framed photograph which for years he has been hanging on the wall for him to see...but when he grew tall enough to study the dim picture. He didn't feel pleased with her appearance. He even wished her to look as pretty as the picture of the white queen in the shop opposite his house. His admiration for the west is visible here. It reflects the crisis that most of the youth of India prior Independence had faced. Sri Ram sees Bharati when she collected funds for the Mahatma's visit to Malgudi and then he attends the meeting to see her again. Here he is inducted to the philosophies of Mahatma. He is inducted into the camp and while cursing the lack of the luxuries in his home slowly becomes used to them. Sri Ram in the beginning, immature and irresponsible completely under the influence of his granny, now leaves her on the mercy of his neighbours. His complete separation from his grandmother occurs immediately after his coming into contact with Bharati, who is a staunch believer of Gandhi. Sri Ram's fascination for Bharati is so strong that he gains an access to Gandhi's ashram where he makes acquaintance with Bharati and decided to become a Gandhian disciple in order to win her heart. He joins Gandhi's entourage. His lethargy was ended and he was galvanized spiritually and emotionally. Shiva M.Pandey has made a point here: 'Sri Ram is shown in the novel as developing from an indifferent type of adolescent without any particular interest or purpose, into a single-minded lover who is willing to make a sacrifice. He is even willing to transform himself into any type of personality which may be suited to serve lone. The intensity of his love goes even beyond the grave. He would only be happy to die if the girl he loves would think well of him after his death'

Sri Ram has transformed from a wayward selfish modern materialist to a staunch lover which in quest of love further transformed him into a spokesman of traditional values, Swaraj and nationally. As part of propagating Gandhi's message, especially 'Quit India' Sri Ram came to the village named Solur. He halted before a shop and shop man told Sri Ram that he had nice biscuits and asked if he wouldn't try it. And after asking if the biscuits were English the shop man replied; purely English biscuits..... in these days no one else can get them?

"Have you no sense of shame?" the other said, taken aback, and then said, 'they, give me the money for what you took and get out here, you are a fellow of Khadi, are you? Oh! Oh! I didn't notice. And so you think you can do what you like, talk as you like, and behave like a rowdy.'

'You may say anything about me, but don't talk ill of this dress- it is - too sacred to be spoken- about in that way' (WM116)

As time roles by, Sri Ram develops genuine love for the Mahatma and his ideals... He undergoes appreciated change in his personality after his meaningful association with Bharati. Their mutual love deepens and develops in the course of their tireless struggle for independence of the nation. He is constantly on the look out to impress and influence Bharati. But his grandmother has chosen a kumbum girl for him but he disapproves her because she is not a qualified girl according to Gandhian principles. In the conscious of Sri Ram his grandmother is a blocking parental figure, as he thinks that she will never permit him to marry Bharati.

Structurally Gandhi is something a father figure in the novel and serves the function of parental opposition as Bharati's god father. For Sri Ram the British government is also the blocking force because it will not keep him and her in the same prison. But consequently after the wait of five years of obstacles he receives the long waited consent of the Mahatma ji to marry Bharati. But what is missing in the above outline is the impact of freedom struggle on ordinary freedom fighters whose names couldn't find place in the history books, whose portraits couldn't make it to the museums, whose heroic stories couldn't live longer than them. "Waiting for the Mahatma" describes the life of such freedom fighters and the contemporary socio-political situation in amazing details. Bharati's character is an epitome of a devotee of Gandhiji. Her life had nothing apart from her Bapu. The fact that she went to jail as a political prisoner and then post-independence went around the dangerous riot stricken areas following Gandhi testifies to the blind faith Bharati had in Mahatma. The character of Bharati is an indication of the charisma of Gandhiji and his influence on his followers. Sri Ram's character is like a person next door. The only aim he had was to 'get' Bharati -the aim of his freedom struggle was not to free India. Neither he is too idealistic nor too realistic. Jagdish's character represents the unknown freedom fighters whose ideology changes with time- sometime following Gandhi ji and sometimes Netaji. He is leading a very ordinary life post independence goes to say not all who fought for the nation became ministers in the new government or heroes in the local areas. Post-independence they became like any other person. One wonders, then, what motivated them to play their life out for the nation? Sri Ram, at least, had Bharati to play for.

CENTRAL ACHIEVEMENT

As the quest of Sri Ram meandered from pre independence to post independence, the reader gets a feel of the society. The fact that Sri Ram's grandmother was not allowed to enter the village after she was found alive at her cremation pyre hints not only at the superstition the people indulge in but also the lack of doctor who could distinguish between life and death. Sri Ram's tenure in the jail hinted at the horrors of the jail and how one gets used to worst of conditions. Sri Ram's interaction with the hotel waiter after his release from jail post independence threw light on the problems ordinary people were facing due to the nascent, inexperienced government. However, the riot sequence when Sri Ram was travelling to Delhi brought out, very subtly, the horrors of Hindu-Muslim riots on the pretext of formation of Pakistan. Here the author portrays the horrors after the partition and how Gandhi has helped to stabilize the society with his fasts and marches in Calcutta and Bihar. The story ends with Mahatma being shot dead by Nathuram Godse.

Waiting for the Mahatma is an exceptional novel in the sense that the actions strays out of Malgudi -it came as far as Delhi-and the two central characters, Sri Ram and Bharati were engaged in politics. Several novelists in Indo-Anglican literature as well as regional languages have exploited the magic of Gandhi's name and presence. What makes this novel different from others is that Gandhi plays a major role from the beginning to the end. In Untouchable Mulk Raj Anand gives Gandhi a part towards the end. K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger writes that, "Gandhi is too big to be given a minor part: on the other hand, he is sure to turn the novel into a biography if he is given a major part. The best thing for the contemporary novelist would be to keep Gandhi in the background but make his influence felt indirectly" (372)

Waiting for the Mahatma is the most controversial novel of R.K.Narayan. Though the title proclaims that it is a novel about Gandhi but it is not a 'Gandhian -Novel'. Narayan only wanted to focus the humane qualities of Gandhi in novel. As is his intention, Narayan aims at telling a straightforward story of some belonging to Malgudi, the town of his mythical imagination" (Jayanthar's Portrayal of Gandhi" 57). Despite the ostensible political theme, the novel centers on a socio cultural crisis. Narayan shuns the intellectual and political debate of the times and saves his characters from getting involved in such issues: and he does not demand such involvement from his readers. He is neither a politically committed novelist like Anand, nor a principled Gandhian like Rao, but "simply the novelist as a novelist" (Aikant97). William Walsh, O.P.Bhatnagar, and R.A.Jayantha praise it. William Walsh suggests that Waiting for the Mahatma is a rare piece of triumph.

Narayan's ambition in writing this novel is not to produce a great political novel. As Tripti Tiwari says, "Gandhi is seen here in relation to the life of an ordinary boy from a remote village in the Deep South. The Mahatmahood of Gandhi is seen more in the tender care with which he treats the common people than the statesman like decisions that he takes about the destiny of the nation" (84). Murthy, the hero of Kanthapura is a typical Gandhian disciple, a kind of Mini Mahatma. "While Murthy is an idealized version of a village lad, Sri Ram is portrayed realistically as a half-educated young man, who is irresistibly drawn towards Bharati" (Tiwari 85).

THE RESPONSE OF CRITICS

The response of critics to "Waiting for the Mahatma" is characterized by diversity. A.N. Kaul regards this novel as Narayan's weakest novel. Dr. M. K. Naik considers this novel as a double failure – failure as a political novel and failure as a love novel. C. D. Narashmaiah grades it so low that the novel has to be withdrawn by the author. Whereas Haydn Moore Williams views it as Narayan's most mature novel. The novel is not a political novel in and out. R. K. Narayan has done an experiment by taking national struggle of freedom as a story. He quite boldly portrayed Gandhiji as a character more as a human not purely as a 'Half Naked Fakir'. Mahatmaji has been depicted as man of flesh and body first and as a great freedom fighter next. Even after his death, as "Waiting for the Mahatma" shows, Gandhi's spirit had been absorbed into the ostentatious Puritanism of the men who came to rule India, the uniqueness of his life and ideas appropriated into the strident Indian claim to the moral high ground a claim first advanced through Gandhi's asceticism and emphasis on nonviolence, and then, later, through the grand rhetoric of socialism, secularism, and nonalignment.

RESULT OF THE STUDY

Apparently the novelist while dealing with the theme of 'Waiting for Mahatma' which was of course Sri Ram was doing for Bharati and Bharati was doing for Mahatma and the purpose was served right before the death of M.K.Gandhi, but in every phase of the novel Narayan quite appropriately tackled with the theme of socio and cultural problems of major to minor all characters of the novel in pre independence and post independence scenario. The development of the main idea of the novel is made through the development of the protagonist who is Sri Ram, an idle youth but turns out to be an ardent freedom fighter only as long as stays near his beloved but no sooner did she part from him he is back into bewilderment and joins Jagdish as P.K. Singh elaborates it thus: His separation from Bharati deviates him from Gandhian path to the way of terrorist movement. The agony of the separation turns into the fire of violence and his peaceful protest into the turbulent agitation. It is indeed the skill of Narayan that through the showcase of love story on the forefront he has managed to bring out the deeper meaning out of this work employing national father figure. It indeed shows Narayan's expertise in handling this genre.

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