

WAITING FOR MAHATMA

R. K. Narayan

Waiting for the Mahatma (Narayan, 1955)

Overview As with most of Narayan's novels, this story focuses on the life of a single character, Sriram, a young man, through whom the reader sees all the action. What makes this novel unique, however, is that it deals directly and explicitly with politics. Whereas Narayan glances at issues of colonialism and independence in many of his books, this one takes those issues as its main topic. The story is set in 1942, when Gandhi announced his 'Quit India' movement. Although Gandhi was widely popular at the time, his 'Quit India' was controversial. Many Indians thought it was better to let the British stay in India until the war against Germany and Japan had been won. Gandhi at first favoured this position but then suddenly, in 1941, shifted his view and began the campaign to drive the British out in the middle of the war.

Story

Sriram is a high school student who lives with his grandmother in the fictional market town of Malgudi, somewhere in the interior of south India. As a typical teenager in this provincial setting, in the 1940s, he knows little about the outside world. When Gandhi comes to town, as part of his tour of the whole country, Sriram doesn't even know who he is. However, he is attracted by a young woman sitting on the platform while Gandhi speaks. Now, Sriram becomes interested in Gandhi and attends all his rallies in order to see Bharati, whose name is significant: it is feminine form of the traditional word for 'India'.

Sriram falls in love with Bharati and eventually joins Gandhi's movement. Admonished by her, encouraged by his headmaster and spellbound when he meets Gandhi, Sriram becomes a new person and undertakes Gandhian work in the countryside. He wanders about the poverty-stricken countryside, where there is little food, and where he paints signs saying 'Quit India' on every surface he finds.

Sriram then succumbs to the influence of a terrorist (not a Gandhi supporter) who persuades to commit acts of sabotage. Sriram is eventually arrested and spends several years in prison, full of guilt and still in love with Bharati. After the war, just before Independence, Sriram is released from jail and goes back to Malgudi, where he learns that his grandmother has nearly died and has left for Benares, in north India, where she intends to spend her final days. A possible happy ending—Gandhi has agreed to the marriage of Sriram and Bharati—is upstaged by the tragedy of the Partition and Gandhi's premonition of his own assassination.

Themes

Hypocrisy This sly, political novel explores the contradictions and outright hypocrisy shown by many of Gandhi's followers. While they line up to profess their support for Gandhi's ideals, such as humility and asceticism, they use his image to promote their own selfish ends. The best example is Mr Natesh, the chairman of the town council. When he hears that the Mahatma is coming to town, he quickly takes down the portraits of English kings that fill his palatial mansion and replaces them with pictures of Gandhi and his lieutenants. Then, when Gandhi visits the house and spends time talking to a low-caste boy, Mr Natesh is horrified that the little urchin might touch one of his masterpieces, a Kashmiri textile hanging on the wall. Another example of hypocrisy is dramatised in the character of Sriram himself. He attends all Gandhi's speeches, which extol the virtues of self-denial and asceticism, and yet he is only there to ogle the beautiful young woman on the stage. Finally, there is the terrorist, Jagadish, whose hypocrisy is perhaps less despicable only because he is aware that he is manipulating Gandhi's image.

Gandhianism The second, and related, theme is Gandhianism, or the philosophical ideals and political strategy of Gandhi. As mentioned above, this is the only Narayan novel with an overtly political subject, and while he presents a nuanced view, there is no doubt that he is sympathetic to Gandhi's principles. In fact, he reserves his criticism for the reception of those principles by the broad population of India. In brief, he suggests that Gandhianism was too advanced for the majority of Indians to understand and implement. The 'Quit India' campaign was incredibly successful—it spread like wild fire and captured the hearts of millions of Indians—but that is precisely Narayan's point: it captured hearts, but its subtle message bypassed their brains. Sriram, for example, is drawn into Gandhi's movement only by his love for a beautiful girl, others support Gandhi because they wish to be associated with powerful men, while still others used his movement as a cloak under which they promoted their own violent ideology. And in the end, Gandhi was murdered, not by a Muslim or an Englishman (his natural enemies) but by a Hindu who thought he was too conciliatory toward India's enemies. Perhaps that is why Narayan chose his title for this novel: India is still waiting for a Mahatma.

Characters

Sriram Sriram, the central character of this novel, is an orphan, who lives with his grandmother. He is a somewhat lazy high school student but later becomes involved in Gandhi's independence movement, only because he has fallen in love with a girl who is committed to the movement. Later, he falls under the spell of a terrorist, commits acts of sabotage and ends up in prison.

Grandmother As the person who raises the orphaned Sriram, the grandmother is an important figure. Although she exhibits a lot of stereotypical 'granny' characteristics, she also has a wicked sense of humour and a stubborn streak, almost to the point of maddening eccentricity. As his guardian, she also keeps a shrewd eye on his bank account. She represents the conservative element in Indian society, who viewed some of Gandhi's reforms with scepticism.

Gandhi The historical Gandhi himself is a major character in the novel, although he appears only twice. He is portrayed as a deeply religious and philosophical person but also prone to human emotions. Narayan's portrait of the great man differs little from the received image of him: humble, sincere, contemplative, intelligent and compassionate.

Bharati Bharati is more a symbol than a complex personality, but she is a significant symbol. Her name is the feminine form of the traditional word for 'India.' She is beautiful, idealistic and tender-hearted. She guides Sriram in his understanding of Gandhian ideals. She goes to jail, is released and, at the end, her marriage to Sriram is blessed by Gandhi.

Mr Natesh Mr Natesh is the chairman of the local town council, a man full of pretension and self-regard. When Gandhi comes to town, he insists that the great man stay in his palatial mansion and is indignant when Gandhi rejects his offer and stays in a hut. He gives a speech at the town's reception for Gandhi, which goes on too long, draws attention to his own supposed philanthropy and makes several dubious statements, such as that the dusty little town of 'Malgudi has all the attractions of Switzerland.'

Jagadish Jagadish is the villain of the piece. Although he pretends to be a Gandhi disciple, and a good friend of Bharati, in reality he is a revolutionary dedicated to the violent overthrow of conventional society. He skilfully recruits Sriram to his cause and persuades him to undertake dangerous missions, such as breaking into an army camp, which lead to Sriram's arrest and imprisonment.

Tea Planter Although the British tea planter makes only a brief appearance in the novel, he performs a key role. He confronts Sriram when the young man paints 'Quite India' on a building on his tea estate. When the two argue, it is clear that Sriram has little understanding of what Gandhi really stands for. The planter is polite, while Sriram falls back on anger.

SRIRAM (Susceptible)

Character Twenty-year-old Sriram is an orphan who lives with his grandmother. In the author's words: 'His mother, who died delivering him, and his father, who died in Mesopotamia [as a soldier fighting for the British Empire in the Great War], might have been figures in a legend as far as Sriram was concerned.' This is significant as it directs the reader to the fact that Sriram has no parental

guidance. Instead, his parents are like legendary figures, without reality, but still powerful as symbols. This is how Sriram will live, an impressionable young man, unrooted, easily swayed, who lacks his own ideas and principles, and is therefore susceptible to be influenced by others. Particularly those with powerful symbolic messages and legendary presence. In fact, the majority of the plot is concerned with the two instances where he falls under the spell of a charismatic individual. Not Gandhi, for that would have made a simple story, but rather the idealistic Bharati and the manipulative (but equally idealistic) terrorist, Jagadish. Although he appears to be feckless and weak-willed throughout most of the novel, toward the end he does learn a certain amount of humility and gains a degree of understanding of Gandhi and Indian politics. This transformation, from an irresponsible youth into a serious-minded, if imperceptive, person, is attributable to his friendship with Bharati. We also cannot question the sincerity of his love for Bharati, to whom he stays loyal to the very end.

Activities Young Sriram is man of leisure, who wanders about town, visiting shops and tea stalls. At twenty years of age, he is given access, supervised by his grandmother, to a sum of 250 rupees (quite large for those days), which had been left to by his parents. This money he spends quickly on small items and pleasures. After his transformation through Bharati (and indirectly through Gandhi), he takes on political work, travelling through villages to spread the message of 'Quit India.' Later, while in prison, he also engages in political discussion.

Illustrative moments

Impressionable Sriram is impressionable in a very literal sense: images make a big impression on him. This quality is demonstrated in the opening pages, when the young man comes across a poster of a woman in a shop. It's not a poster of some movie star but rather of an Englishwoman, and obviously an important figure. 'Maybe it's Queen Victoria,' the shopkeeper suggests. Sriram doesn't care who it is, but he is aware that the picture has a hold over him. He wants to buy the picture, the shopkeeper refuses and Sriram pouts. In the very next scene, he tells his grandmother that he 'wishes I had a picture of my father. Then I could worship it and become as clever as he was.'

Susceptible Sriram's impressionability makes him susceptible to the influence of others. We see how easily he is manipulated in the scene where he first meets Jagadish, the terrorist. Jagadish approaches Sriram and says that he knows Bharati, which is enough to make Sriram receptive to him. Then he says that 'these are exceptional times, and we must do what we feel is right, even if we can't follow the Mahatma's orders.' In other words, 'follow me.' Out of touch with Gandhi and with Bharati, Sriram follows the closest thing to him with a plan: Jagadish. When Jagadish shows him a box (containing a radio that will receive secret messages from a revolutionary leader in exile), all that Sriram can think of is a box of chocolates he once saw but never ate. He is the innocent about to be manipulated and sent on a path that will lead to prison.

Superficial Although Sriram eventually develops into a serious-minded Gandhian, he never actually understands the message of non-violence, humility and swaraj ['self-rule']. His superficial understanding is somewhat humorously displayed in one scene when he gets involved in a discussion with an Englishman regarding Gandhi's programme. One day, while painting the 'Quit India' message on a wall on a tea estate, a worker tells him that the owner might shoot him, and Sriram begins to imagine how Bharati would mourn him. Then, when the Englishman asks who he is, Sriram replies, 'I am a messenger from the Mahatma.' 'What message?' the man asks. 'You must quit India.' 'Why?' 'I don't know, I'm just giving you the message.' The man invites Sriram inside and gives him a cool drink (Sriram says he 'doesn't drink' but the man adds that it isn't 'that kind of drink.'). Looking around the modest bungalow, Sriram launches into a little speech, cobbling together half-thoughts and phrases he remembers from listening to Gandhi and others. By the end, it is clear that Sriram's muddled thinking represents what Narayan thinks of the political discourse spouted by many of Gandhi's supporters.

GRANDMOTHER (Frugal)

Character Sriram is brought up by his grandmother, a woman of unspecified age, though we are meant to think of her as very old, perhaps a hundred. She has lost her husband and then her son, and now has charge of her only grandson. As such, she is a fascinating mixture of kindness, eccentricity, stubbornness, self-sufficiency and mischief. She is, as is expected, a pious Hindu woman, always observing ritual days, fasting, lighting lamps and regulating her life by the 'stars.' As

Sriram's guardian, she not only keeps a tight lid on his bank account but is also extremely protective of her grandson. At times, her guardianship becomes almost hysterical because she fears that Bharati and Gandhi are taking her grandson away from her, and she will be left alone. She is sceptical about Gandhi himself, saying that his fasts, which she herself undergoes regularly, are nothing remarkable and that his politics are dangerous because they land people in prison. She may be considered a frightened person, and she is wary of any cultural or social change, but in the end, both her chief fears prove to have been valid. Her grandson does leave her in order to follow a woman he loves and to become a soldier in Gandhi's army. And, Sriram does go to prison for his political activity. In the end, with Sriram in jail and she does not hear from him, she becomes ill and undertakes the long pilgrimage to Benares, in north India, where she plans to end her days.

Activities The grandmother spends most of her time in domestic chores, cooking and cleaning, and religious activity. She strictly observes the ritual calendar, which imposes a great deal of ceremonies (called pujas) on Indian women and especially on widows, like herself. We watch as she goes through the small details of arranging specific flowers in particular pots in specific places at particular times of the day. She also spins cotton (like Gandhi, though she does have much time for him), pounds rice, grinds flour and chops firewood.

Illustrative moments

Fastidious The grandmother's fastidious adherence to Hindu customs is illustrated in an early scene. It is Sriram's twentieth birthday, which is the day when she will relinquish control of his bank account and he will assume control, with her supervision. It is a major transition not only for him but for her, too. In order to celebrate the day properly, she goes a long way to obtain a stick of sugar cane. 'No birthday is truly celebrated,' she announces, 'unless sugar cane is there.' Then she draws an intricate geometric pattern with rice powder just outside the front door. And later she decorates the door frames with strings of mango leaves. 'It's auspicious,' she comments to her grandson, who looks at her with a confused expression. She wanted to invite all the neighbours and hire a brass band, but Sriram had objected.

Frugal The grandmother is also a very frugal person. Having saved every penny of her late son's pension, she put it in a bank account, which Sriram can use when he reaches the age of twenty. The second scene in the novel, following the ritual described above, demonstrates her frugality. At the bank, when Sriram learns that he is permitted to draw out a maximum of 250 rupees per day, he says he wants that amount on the first day, but his grandmother advises him that 'it is always best if money is unspent.' He persists in his demand for the full 250, but she grabs the pen and changes the amount to 50. Although the grandmother's frugality might be seen by some as miserliness, Narayan suggests that it is simply her way of caring for her grandson; restricting his spending power, in other words, is an expression of love. The scene continues when she walks with her grandson back home, and the neighbours pester her to know what's going on and how much money he will inherit. To all these questions, she says nothing and tells her son to do the same throughout life, adding that his grandfather ruined his life by talking too much. Grandmother is tight-lipped as well as tight-fisted.

Skeptical The aged, conservative grandmother is not entirely convinced that 'this fellow Gandhi' is as special as others make out. In this respect, she represents a largely ignored segment of Indians who did have doubts about his politics, scoffed at his grandstanding gestures and thought that his saintly image was exaggerated. Her scepticism is illustrated in the middle of the novel, when she is greeted by the local schoolmaster, who happens to comment, 'Oh, your pet is with Gandhi's people, I see.' Narayan then writes: 'Granny became alarmed at this news because, for her, Gandhi preached dangerous things, brought untouchables into the temples and got people involved with the police.' As readers, of course, we know that part of her concern is that she is afraid her grandson will abandon her if he takes up a political cause. And this is precisely what does happen.

GANDHI (Compassionate)

Character The historical figure of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (known widely as the Mahatma, or 'Great Soul') is a key character in this novel. Although he physically appears only twice, his character, his image and his ideals, are present throughout the entire book. Narayan himself was never active in politics, not even during the widespread Gandhian movement, but he was a shrewd

observer of all things political and obviously had a soft place for Gandhi. His fictional Gandhi is very close to the image of the historical Gandhi, who lived from 1869 to 1948: he is an embodiment of the principles of non-violence, humility and compassion. Beyond these idealised but realistic qualities, though, he is also affected in personal ways. He is moved by Sriram's devotion to him, he is saddened by the killings that take place during the Partition, which followed Independence, when millions of Muslims crossed over into newly-created Pakistan and millions of Hindus (and Sikhs) travelled in the other direction. He is also portrayed as a clever, almost scheming man, a great general who marshals his troops or a great politician who plays a cool hand against his opponent. In these ways, the novelist succeeds where the historian might fail: instead of presenting Gandhi as the statesman or charismatic religious figure, which he undeniably was, we see him on the human level, through the eyes of a young man in rural south India.

Activities

Gandhi is shown engaged in his political and spiritual campaigns. He makes speeches and he visits villages, where he pays special attention to children and to Harijans (the lowest rung on the caste ladder). As in real life, we also see him taking long walks in the open country, during which he converses with his close associates, which include Bharati and later Sriram. At other times, he is shown to be alone, engaged in prayer or contemplation.

Illustrative moments

Compassionate As a novelist, Narayan shows us small details that reveal the character of Gandhi. One of those scenes illustrates Gandhi's compassion for the poor and downtrodden. The setting is the palatial mansion of Mr Natesh, the pompous chairman of the town council. Natesh has arranged for a sumptuous reception for the great man at his residence, so that he can display his wealth and influence to all the other guests. Just outside the front door, before he actually crosses the threshold into the house, Gandhi hesitates. He sees a small boy and beckons him forward and gives him an orange that Natesh had given to Gandhi ('A special gift, from my own garden,' Natesh had said). To the horror of Natesh, Gandhi beckons more of the poor children forward and asks Natesh to give each one an orange. Natesh obliges, though his blood is boiling.

Humble A second quality that everyone ascribes to the historical Gandhi and which Narayan is able to dramatise is his humility. After the grand reception for Gandhi in Mr Natesh's house (just described), Mr Natesh expects the great man to honour him by spending the night in one of his eighteen bedrooms. Instead, Gandhi chooses to sleep in a bamboo hut belonging to the family of one of the boys to whom he gave an orange. The hut is by the river, a long distance away, but Gandhi says he wants to walk. Natesh is affronted and again asks Gandhi to stay in his 'humble house,' but Gandhi says that he is an old man and hopes that Natesh will show sympathy and not expect him to walk around such 'vast spaces in your house.' And that is where Gandhi spent his one night in Malgudi, in a bamboo hut, by a river, where he spins cotton on a wheel, prays and plays with children.

Clairvoyant In the very last pages, Narayan's Gandhi shows that he has clairvoyance, something that the historical Gandhi was not said to possess. Narayan makes it clear that it is the day that Gandhi was assassinated (30 January 1948). He is talking with Sriram and Bharati, hearing the details of what they had done since he last saw them two years ago and giving them his blessing for their marriage. Then he shocks them by saying, 'I have a feeling that I may not attend your wedding tomorrow.' They ask him why he says this, and he answers, 'I don't know. It's all god's will.' Five minutes later, after leaving them and going outside to conduct a large prayer meeting, he was shot dead. This scene proved controversial among many Indian readers, who thought that Narayan has made Gandhi into a sort of soothsayer, on a par with the stereotypical, and charlatan, snake-charmer.