

## **Quest Motif in R. K. Narayan's 'Waiting for the Mahatma': A Study of his Major Characters**

**By**

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**Abstract:** The 'quest' theme has been dealt with in literature of all ages and countries. In literature, quest is one of two paradigms, which find repeated expression – the mythic fall and the mythic quest. Quest stands for fundamental pursuit made to obtain something higher. The quest motif consists of three successive stages – separation, initiation and then returns to be resorted to before any kind of quest is complete.

**Introduction:** In 'Waiting for the Mahatma', the quest motif is studied and interpreted through Sriram, the hero of the novel. His perpetual quest for self, to understand a greater reality about him is examined in his intimate relationship with Bharati, who is instrumental in his self discovery. It is through this relationship that he achieves progressive clarification and sublimation. The theme is interpreted in working out the various stages in the content and development of his close association with Bharati, the subsequent separation from her, and eventual entry into physical and realistic relationship.

**A careful study of self discovery:** A careful study of self discovery in Sriram unfolds that as the novel develops, steady and consistent progression of his character takes place on maternal, sensual and sublimation levels- through working of enema at different stages of his life.

'Waiting for the Mahatma' for its motive, content and structure is a Gandhi novel and explores the ramifications of Gandhian quest. It is throughout story of loan and politics. When

the novel opens, Sriram is shown as an orphan, who has been brought up and looked after by his veteran grandmother, granny. Sriram is still immature, unwilling and irresponsible at the age of twenty, is borne out by the fact that his grandmother does not allow him to act individually and spend money independently. His lifestyle and routine work is influenced by his grandmother, who says, “It’s going to be your twentieth birthday, although you behave as if you are half that. His grandmother is the guest as well as the hostess on his twentieth birthday.” (Waiting for the Mahatma, 16)

Sriram life process follows the quest structure. In the first stage, Sriram is visibly a victim of monotony and hatred owing to his isolated and shadowy life under the nose of his conservative grandmother. Sriram complete separation from his grandmother occurs immediately after his coming in to contact with Bharati, who is a staunch disciple of Gandhi. Sri rams fascination for Bharati is so strong that he gains an access o 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. Before meeting Bharati he had been an indifferent type of student and young man. He had been living a life of indifferent isolation. The very first sight off Bharati made him leap out of his “age old somnolence”, catapulted him into her love and woke him up to the life of Malgudi now stirring for the reception of the mahatma. Bharati is the magician who proves a turning point in Sriram’s dull and slow life. His lethargy was ended and he was galvanized spiritually and emotionally. At this juncture of life a good hearted, average young man starts turning into purposeful adult, an obedient disciple and devoted lover, *Shiva M. Pandey* has made a point here:

“Sriram is shown in the novel as developing from and indifferent type of adolescent without any particular interest or purpose, into a single minded lover who is willing to make any 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 even beyond the grave. He would only be happy to die if the girl he loves would think well of him after his death.”

Love is Sriram’s solitary obsession. It is at the bottom of all other graces, which he gradually acquires in a fitful, flattering way in the course of his journey as a lover. But as time

roles on, he develops the genuine love for the Mahatma and his ideals. He started practicing Ram dhun and reading Ramayana n Bhagwadgita. Sriram undergoes an appreciable change in his personality after his meaningful association with Bharati. She reveals in herself the prospects of the mother as well as mistress and loving companion. She actively shares his frustrations as well as aspirations. The mutual love of Sriram and Bharati deepens and develops in the course o their tireless struggle for independence of the nation. As long as Sriram lives with Bharati he absorbs the Gandhian thought as much as he can, but the tension between his impulse to love Bharati and marry her on the one hand and the instruction of the Mahatma to observe continuance of Gandhian teaching on the other is very much there. A conjunction of circumstances leads him to another period of lethargy and inertia.

In the second and most important phase, Sriram is a greatly changed man, as a result of passing through a variety of experiences. It is the second stage of quest only that the hero attains maturity of thought and independence in action. He is constantly on the look out to impress and influence Bharati whom he loved more than anybody else. Sriram's 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 consciousness of Sriram, his grandmother is a blocking parental figure, as e thinks that she will not permit him to marry Bharati. The Kumbum girl is, then, a potential rival of Bharati, and Gorpad and Jagdish may prove to be the powerful rivals for Bharati's hand. Structurally Gandhi is something a father figure in the novel and serves the function of parental opposition as Bharati's god father with his catch word "not yet". Sriram feels the British government to be blocking force because it will not keep him and Bharati in the same prison. As a result, he has to wait for five long years before the obstacles disappear and he has Gandhi's permission to marry Bharati.

In the third phase, there is a sea – change in the general outlook and attitude towards the life of the character. Towards the end of the novel, Sriram appears to be a completely different and improved man. The Britishers have already abandoned India, Indian people have won freedom, the struggle has ended, the political prisoners have been released, Sriram's grandmother has left for Banaras to wait for the liberation of her soul from the decaying body,

and Gandhi grants his long awaited permission to the young couple to marry. Towards the happy ending of the love story, the young couple is to begin their married life nursing the wounds of suffering humanity.

Sriram's transformation and resultant quest can also be interpreted from oriental perspective of deep faith, aspiration and complete surrender. When one examines Sriram's transformation and the resultant accomplishment of quest from this perspective, one certainly finds that Sriram starts with an unflinching faith in Gandhian philosophy of non- violence, love, truth and sweetness: "though the Mahatma's physical presence was no longer with him, Sriram had a feeling that his movements were being guided" (Waiting for the Mahatma, 63). His faith and conviction in Gandhi and his teachings is so profound that he takes to terrorist activities on the advice of Jagdish.

**Central Achievement:** To make an opening to higher knowledge, the central achievement is seminal to aspiration. When one opens oneself to higher action, it is the path of Karma. On the planes of aspiration, Sriram should be considered as a Karma Yogi, as a result of his complete surrender to the fire of aspiration. *Sri Aurobindo* is worth quoting in this connection:

"It is self evident that in the actual struggle of man's intellectual, social, political moral we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and live and between all that stands behind either. It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance , to grow, to fulfill and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct."

The role of Bharati is to central importance in the development of the story. It is she who changes the course of Sriram's life and her first appearance marks the first major turning point in the story. Unlike Sriram, Bharati seems to be almost perfect from the beginning that is why she becomes Sriram's guru as soon as the two get acquainted with each other. She is both a means and an end for Sriram to reach the level of being which has observed the Gandhian philosophy. Sriram begins to understand the teachings of the Mahatma through his love for Bharati. She is a perfect example of the emancipated Indian womanhood. Humble, devoted and firm, she has

learnt the mastery of the senses. Although she falls in love with Sriram, she never loses her control on her emotions. Love for Bharati is not an uncontrollable emotion but something to be lived in the spiritual sense. For Bharati, the sensuous must be subdued by the spiritual; Sriram's love does have spiritual potential but it is too much interlaced with the sensuous. Bharati is a tempering agent; she keeps challenging Sriram to strive towards the Gandhian ideals, the only way through which their love can survive.

Bharati seems to understand and practice the spirit of Gandhian love. Her love for Sriram is a living example of the Gandhian concept of love. Her appearance and actions clearly indicate that she is capable of being happy amidst all kinds of sufferings, which is an unavoidable companion of Bharati throughout her journey towards self realization.

It is not easy to exactly nail down as to what Bharati quest is. It is clear that her path is Gandhian and her trust in his philosophy is so deep that she is never assailed by any doubts. The path seems to lie clear and straight in front of her. She passes through different experiences as Sriram does, but unlike Sriram, each new experience for Bharati, is a shaping force, his experiences, however, lacks clear direction.

Bharati is never confronted with contradictory thoughts. No sacrifice is too big for her and no amount of suffering too intolerable. She takes every difficulty in her stride and is always more interested in what she is doing than in her own feelings. She does not even confess her love for Sriram, her response to Sriram's love is positive but assertive. Her whole life is designed on Gandhian philosophy; she knows that the first and foremost thing is self discipline. The impulses must be guided by reason; there can be no love without austerity. When Sriram assaults her, she immediately realizes that this unrestrained expression of impulses does not get along with Gandhian philosophy:

She felt the trembling of his body, and said, 'I should not be coming here

or meeting you if I didn't.'

'Wouldn't Mahatma have known?'

'No, His mind is too pure to think anything wrong.'

‘What is wrong with what?’

‘This is very wrong – we – we should not have – I – I -’ she sobbed. ‘I don’t know what Bapu will think of me now. I must write to him what has happened.’

(Waiting for the Mahatma, 90)

The path of self – realization for Bharati is constant self disciplining – the disciplining of one’s thought processes, senses, and their physical actions. Truth and non – violence, in the deepest Gandhian sense of these words, are the tools that lead one towards the refinement of one’s character.

Although Bharati’s love for Sriram seems to be one of the shaping influences in her life, the dimension of this influence remains unexpressed. It is clear, however, that Bharati is ready to sacrifice her love for Sriram if it poses any obstacle on her way to continue following the Gandhian path. When Jagdish arranges a secret meeting of Sriram with Bharati, she refused to meet him and send him a letter saying:

‘I cannot bring myself to see you today. It seems degrading to have a meeting under these conditions. Bapu has always said that this is dishonorable to assume subterfuges. In a jail we must observe the rules or change them by Satyagraha openly, if possible. Forgive me.’

(Waiting for the Mahatma, 116)

**Result of the study:** Bharati’s love, like Gandhian concept of universal love, embraces not only Sriram but the sufferings of a tortured India as well. On the other hand, Sriram’s love remains focused on Bharati alone, though it is much more disciplined towards the end of the novel than in the beginning. Bharati’s looking after the orphaned children, is symbolic of the fact that her love is too comprehensive to be confined within the bonds of Sriram’s love. It could probably be said that if Bharati’s quest is for the Gandhian concept of Universal love, she succeeds in reaching it.

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