
JOURNEY OF SIRAM FOR INDIANNESS IN WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA

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Abstract : Pre-independent period was not only aimed at the political consolidation of the nation but also of culture. It is reflected in *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R.K. Narayan. The novel has a strong cultural and mental decolonization purpose. It rejects the culturally dominant ‘other’ and establishes the ‘self’ through rewriting the colonial ‘hidden transcript’ with Gandhism which reflects the typical Indian ethos. It can be called an indigenous re-Indianization novel. Narayan writes the metamorphosis of Sriram into a true Indian in five stages. At the end Sriram dedicates his life for India. The independent India has attempted to form an underlying ethos out of the indigenous heterogenic ideologies and cultures.

Keywords: culture, colonization, Gandhi, Indian

When cultures encounter each other do they enhance or endanger each other? The world history teaches that the powerful take the control. “Culture can be seen both as a historically constituted domain of significant concepts and practices and as a regime in which power achieves its ultimate apotheosis” (Dirks, 5). As a result, the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Game are symbols of Colonialism of cultures. The word ‘native’ itself is formed out of the western superiority complex. In the colonial period of India, the anti-colonial struggle was primarily focused on the political realm. The intelligentsia intentionally side-lined the problem of cultural regeneration and they focused on the political agitation out of the fear that the social reformation may deviate from the goal of political freedom (Panikkar, 52). Notwithstanding that the cultural decolonization was neglected, pre-independent period was the time to assert and establish Indianness. The period is not only aimed at the political consolidation of the nation but also of culture. Politically, the colonial yoke was lifted but the mental mark had yet to be healed in order to assert the nation’s identity.

Colonialism has an enduring unconscious control over its subjects. “The postcolonial world is one in which we may live after colonialism but never without it” (Dirks, 23). *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R.K. Narayan has a strong cultural and mental decolonization purpose. It rejects the culturally dominant ‘other’ and establishes the ‘self’ through rewriting the colonial ‘hidden transcript’(Scott, xii) with Gandhism which reflects the typical Indian ethos. It

can be called an indigenous re-Indianization novel. “Narayan’s intimacy, as a writer, is with ordinary persons, their personal predilections, oddities, hysterics, and illusions and through them, he generally gets concerned with the whole predicament of man’s existence as such, his search for identity somewhere, for some standby in life, something that could carry him across” (Gupta,51). Narayan writes the metamorphosis of Sriram into a true Indian in five stages.

In the first stage, Sriram has a fair complexion and acts as Lord Macaulay has envisaged ‘We must at present do our best to form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, morals, and in intellect.’ He is chronically colonized and even he does not like his mother’s Indian look. ‘[Sriram] didn’t feel pleased with her [his mother’s] appearance’ (Narayan,1). On the other hand he liked the unknown European queen. ‘...he wished she [his mother] looked like that portrait of a European queen with apple checks and wavy coiffure hanging in the little shop opposite his house...’ (WM 1). At any cost, he wanted to possess the portrait of the European queen. Likewise, Kanni the shopkeeper shares the intellectual servitude. He considers the portrait of a European queen, as precious because it ‘brought luck’ (WM 2). The imperial rulers colonize even the aesthetic sense of Indians. The Indians have appreciation for the west and blindly follow western culture.

In the second stage, Sriram is shaken when he meets with alluring Indianness. ‘She [Bharati] looked so different from the beauty in Kanni’s shop his critical faculties were at once alert, and he realized how shallow was the other beauty, the European queen, and wondered that he had ever given her a thought’ (WM 15). Bharati becomes an instrument to reveal the real Indianness to Sriram. She, the sincere follower of Gandhiji, is the daughter of Bharat. ‘Bharat is India, and Bharati is the daughter of India’ (WM 45). Sriram gets attached to Bharati and he is ready to accept her advice. ‘Why don’t you [Bharati] take me [Sriram] as your pupil?’ (WM 45). Here, Sriram, also meets Gandhiji, who is the embodiment of the real ethos of India. Although he joined in the crowd with Gandhiji, he does not follow him as a disciple. Since Sriram was introduced to the Indianness he began to reflect on it. “This was the first time he was assailed by doubts of his own prowess and understanding” (WM 21). Sriram feels that he has to change his life style. ‘Yes, Bapuji, I will be a different man.’ (WM 53). Gandhiji initiates him to discover himself. ‘Why do you say “different”? You will be all right if you are fully yourself,’ (WM 53). This is an allegory to discover the Indian ethos and live according to it.

In the third stage, Sriram moves to Pseudo-Gandhian and actively participates in the freedom struggle. “Learning that she is a follower of Gandhiji, he decides to become his disciple to be able to be close to her- neither understanding nor having any interest in Gandhiji’s philosophy” (Ramana, 46). He scolds Granny for speaking ill about Gandhiji. ‘I won’t hear anyone speak lightly of him.’ ... ‘He

[Gandhiji] is not a man; he is a Mahatma!' cried Sriram' (WM 64-65). In spite of the fact that, he tries to practice Gandhism without proper conviction. At this level the transformation process was progressing. 'He felt he was becoming a citizen of an entirely new world' (WM 56). The author narrates the departure of Sriram from Granny like Buddha went for enlightenment at night from his wife Yasodhara. Sriram participates in 'Quit India' in his own way and experiments Gandhian way of satyagraha. He tries to imitate Gandhiji blindly like a child who fails to behave prudently according to the situation. The crowd is a projection of the inner world of Sriram who moves with shallow Gandhian conviction. The crowd may not have thorough understanding of Gandhiji but to see the great legend they gather around him. The crowd is a symbol of those who do not practice Gandhism. After independence Indian leaders except very few failed to follow Gandhism.

In the fourth stage, Sriram moves to the extremist group when the Indian National Army goes ahead under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose. Jagadish praises him: 'I'll have a lavani composed of Subhas Babu's life, his sacrifice, patriotism, courage, and make it compulsory to sing it every day in every school' (WM 118). In 1939, Indira Gandhi wrote: "[Subhas] had come to be regarded as the leader of the 'left'" (Gandhi, 217). Bose and collaborators dedicated their life 'to free our dear motherland' (WM 116). More than self they loved the nation. 'Our lives are not very important. Our work is more important' (WM 121). At the end Sriram is arrested.

The fifth stage commences at jail. 'My jail seems to be on my back, all the time,' he reflected' (WM 190). The jail life enlightens him like Buddha under the bodhi tree. At last, he makes the confession before Gandhiji (wm198). Sriram and Bharati take the great mission entrusted by Gandhiji: 'May you be their father and mother' (WM 199). Thus, Sriram dedicates his life for India.

Sriram and Bharati are the archetypes of the true sons and daughters of India. The word 'Sriram' has multiple dimensions which signifies Indian culture. Obviously, it stands for an average adolescent boy who represents the identity of the average Indian. Next, it denotes 'Ram' in the Ramayana who kills Ravana and it proclaims the glorious Indian ethos. Narayan uses popular gods and goddesses of India to convey Indian messages. The words Ramayana, Gita, Ram, Sita, are used three, five, twelve, and three times respectively in the novel. It, also, connotes the *manthra* of Gandhiji which Sriram repeats for his spiritual renewal: 'Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, Pathita Pavana Sita Ram (WM 74).

The lives of Sriram and Bharati have similarities with that of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and his wife Prabhavati. Prabhavati lived with Gandhiji for seven years and Kasturba died in her arms in 1943 (Bhattacharjea, 46-47). JP joined with the Gandhian movement in 1921 for non-cooperation movement. Later, during his studies in America he moved to Marxism. "JP was as much if not

more impatient than the group of younger leaders of the Congress, such as Subhas Chandra Bose [...]to begin the fight to capture power from the British” (Bhattacharjea, 45). Whereas, Prabhavati stood for non-violence without the influence of Marxism of the husband. Like Sriram, JP also was a part of an underground movement during the Quit India movement and was jailed (Hardiman, 198). Many senior leaders were released from jail after the war of 1945 in Europe but JP was released only in 1946. Later he accepted non-violence like Sriram. For the rest of his life, JP ardently followed Gandhism. Comparable with Bharati, Gandhiji considered Prabhavati as a true hero of non-violence. In the post-independent period India had to resist the hegemonic influence of the west by building up the national identity. Decolonization is a process of self-discovery and a time to erase the painful memories of colonization, to become mentally sound to experience one’s culture positively and to build up universal brotherhood without losing one’s national ethos. Decolonization is not the term for cultural isolation but establishment of self-identity. Thus, always constructive interactions of cultures are necessary. The independent India has attempted to form an underlying ethos out of the indigenous heterogenic ideologies and cultures. Developing a socio-cultural consciousness is vital in the life of each citizen like Sriram.

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