

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF R K NARAYAN'S WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA:
REVISITING GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

R K Narayan's novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* covers in considerable detail the years of political turmoil preceding the Partition of India, taking Mahatma Gandhi as one of its leading characters. The article attempts to analyse how the novel illustrates the role of Gandhi as a political leader and philosophical guide and the influence of his ideology and philosophy on other characters during the Indian independence movement. First, it pinpoints Gandhi's philosophical thoughts as documented in his own writings and activities and then points out how those are integrated into the novel. The article also investigates the attitudes of Gandhi's followers (as the characters of the novel) as well as those of the common people towards his thoughts and activities. Thus, the study aims to offer a textual analysis of the novel by revisiting Gandhian philosophy focusing, especially, on values of ahimsa, Satyagraha, and non-violent resistance.

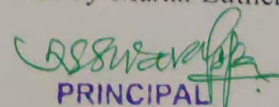
Keywords: *South Asian writing in English, Gandhi's, Satyagraha, Non-violent resistance, Civil disobedience, Partition of India*

Introduction and Background

Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), written after eight years of India's Partition, is the most political novel by R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) who is one of the pioneers of South Asian Writing in English. Although some of his contemporary novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao somewhat brought an image or presence of Gandhi in their respective novels e.g., *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938), Narayan in this novel presents the Mahatma as a real character, depicting different dimensions of his political and philosophical ideologies. Presenting Mahatma as a character in fiction is quite challenging, considering the vitality and vivacity of the person himself. Gandhi has been portrayed from several perspectives in the novel. However, Narayan who was not a politically committed novelist has left the portrayal of Gandhi up to interpretations of the readers.

A political thinker and man of action, Gandhi was not a typical philosopher. He lived through his philosophy by leading the Indians to achieve certain moral qualities in order to struggle against British colonisation. His philosophical thoughts took shape in the face of racial violence and persecution during his stay in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. After his visit to London in 1908 as a member of the Indian Delegation, during his return voyage to South Africa on the ship he wrote the book *Hind Swaraj* (1909) in Gujarati (its English translation was published in 1910).

In this book, he sketched his political philosophy by coining and explaining the term "Satyagraha". Written in a question-answer format, the book was a reply to "the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa" (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* 13) who wanted national independence through acts of violence in response to colonial violence. Gandhi thereupon took up non-violence as his political philosophy throughout his life in any circumstance. He explained the context, "I met every known Indian anarchist in London. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I felt that violence was no remedy for India's ills, and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection." (ibid.). Significantly, Gandhi identified violence as one of social or national ills that would accelerate more violence, division, disorder, and discrimination and not bring true independence to Indians. In fact, his ideas of non-violence as a tool for political resistance against oppression and discrimination got global recognition and could influence several global movements such as the liberation movement led by Martin Luther King in the US and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.


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