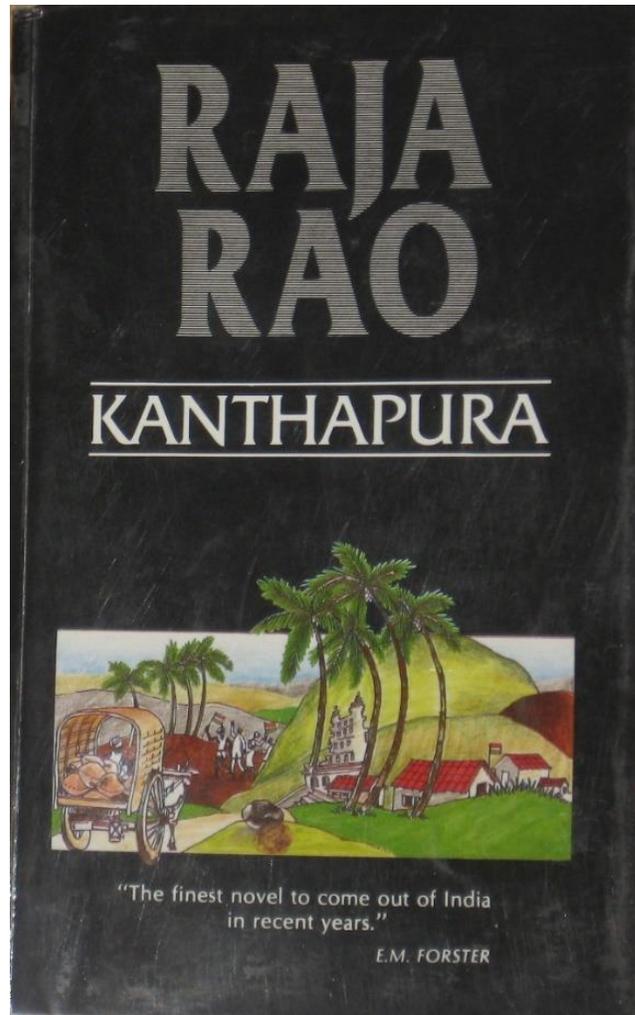


**The Gandhian Era and Gandhian Ideology in Indo-Anglian Fiction**  
*Kanthapura and Waiting for the Mahatma*

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.

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**Abstract**

This research paper analyses the emergence of the Independence movement not only as a political struggle but also an all pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the nineteen twenties and thirties with a focus on the ideology of Gandhiji as the moving force behind the

national upsurge, making it a point that the Gandhian ideology became not only a philosophy of life but a way of life that made the whole country acutely conscious of its present and its past out and out stirring it with new hopes for the future. It examines how Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a tale showing Gandhi's charismatic effect on a small obscure village, Kanthapura which responds wonderfully to Gandhi's call for non-cooperation and non-violence.

**Key Words:** Gandhian ideology, charismatic effect, idealized character, political consciousness, genuine nationalism, Truth, silent communion, permeating influence.

### **Not Merely a Political Struggle**

What is universally understood and accepted is that the Independence movement in India “was not merely a political struggle, but an all pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the nineteen twenties and thirties.... That was an experience that was national in nature” (Mukherjee 14). No Indian writer could avoid this national upsurge. The ideology of Gandhiji was the moving force behind the national upsurge and the Gandhian ideology no doubt, became not only a philosophy of life but a way of life that made the whole country acutely conscious of its present and its past out and out stirring it with new hopes for the future. A society undergoing resurrection and transformation provided a fertile soil for fiction. The dawn of self-awareness in a society long surpassed under the British rule provided variety of themes to the novelists and compelled them to think a new over the numerous social and national problems. It was in fact, that during this Gandhian Era that “Indian English novel discussed some of its most significant themes – freedom struggle, East-West relationship, quest of identity, the exploitation of the underdog, the search for justice and fair play, the treatment of the rural life etc.” (Kumar 25)

### **Gandhian Ideology and the Indian English Writer**

Truly speaking, the Indian English writer basked in the broad and radiant sunshine of Gandhian ideology. No discussion of Indian English fiction would be complete without the assessment of the all pervasive influence of M. K. Gandhi. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments thus:

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“The most potent force behind the whole movement, the Mahatma is a recurring presence in these novels, and he is used in different ways to suit the design of each writer. He has been treated variously as an idea, a myth, a symbol, a tangible reality, and a benevolent human being. In a few novels, he appears in person, in most others his is an invisible presence” (P 61).

### **Two-fold Influence**

The influence of Gandhi on Indian literature during this period was two-fold. First, as a writer, he evolved chaste, lucid and simple style which influenced contemporary writing. Secondly, he influenced the thematic content and structure of Indian English fiction. K.R.S. Iyengar holds:

“As regards the choice of themes and the portrayal of character, the Gandhian influence has been no less marked. There has been a more or less conscious shift of emphasis from the city to the village, or there is implied a contrast between the two – urban luxury and sophistication on the one hand and rural modes and manners on the other” (P 278).

In Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, the Mahatma never appears in person but his presence is felt everywhere. A local figure appears here so as to represent the Mahatma who stands for compassion, gentleness and ability. In R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the Mahatma appears as a warm human being. In Anand’s *Untouchable*, Mahatma Gandhi appears as a crusader of the evil of untouchability.

### **Gandhi’s Arrival**

When Gandhi came on the literary scene, Indian social system badly needed change and reform. Gandhiji very exhaustively dealt not only with the economic or political problems but also with the social problems of the Indian society. Social reformation failed to clear the society of its deep-rooted evils. The image of India outside its national borders had been damaged and for a foreigner, India was a land of superstitions. Indian society was blotted with the evils of child-marriage and untouchability. Widow re-marriage was resisted in so-called upper castes and female education was not greatly encouraged. Poverty further had deteriorated the social conditions. It was in these circumstances that as a karma-yogi, Gandhi tried to pin-point these

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social evils and reform the Indian society. The Mahatma was against the various superstitions found among the Indian people. He also strongly and forcefully condemned untouchability. He wrote in *Young India* in 1920:

“Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom,  
nor get it if they allow their noble religion  
to be disregarded by the retention of  
taint of untouchability” (Mukhi 60)

### **Creative Writers Carrying the Message of the Mahatma**

Gandhi suggested that social reformers should take steps for allowing the untouchables to enter temples and worship there. He was pained to see communities being denounced as untouchables and Shudras. He condemned the caste system and supported inter-caste marriages. The Mahatma also felt that ban on widow re-marriage was another social evil. Gandhiji’s words of non-violence, of inter-caste co-operation and the abolition of untouchability have found a notable place in the fictional world of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Venkataramani which carried in all respects the message of the Mahatma. The Gandhian ideology found a strong and genuine expression rather profoundly in Indian English Fiction. In the western world there is a controversy among learned people whether Gandhi’s teachings have any immediate relevance to the present civilization and whether Gandhism is a live force in Indian today. Whatever may be the fact, it has to be accepted that, though the impact of Gandhiji at deeper levels has not been effective enough to produce lasting results, Gandhi literature is already vast and rapidly growing. His influence on the whole field of Indo-Anglian literature has been very extensive indeed.

### **Emerging Schools of Fiction**

Before the nineteen-thirties, there was no proper school of Indian fiction and Bengali novels got translated into English. In some sense, these novels did not legitimately belong to the history of Indian Writing in English. And then “... there came a sudden flowering of Indian fiction in English in the nineteen thirties – a period during which the star of Gandhiji attained its meridian on the Indian horizon” (Naik 361). Mahatma Gandhi loomed large in Indo-Anglian Fiction during and after his life time. The inspiration and influence which the literatures in India have imbibed from Gandhiji are of immense value.

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## Gandhism and Indian Writing in English

Gandhism as a distinct influence on Indian Writing in English has been felt with the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, K.Nagarajan's *Chronicles of Kedaram*, Anand Lall's *The House at Adampur*, Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to Be Happy*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*.

Almost all these novelists are said to have been greatly influenced by Gandhi and his philosophy and so in their novels their sole intention was a to project the image of Gandhi and the value of Gandhism. They all felt that they were "partaking in the patriotic duty of spreading the 'gospel' which would eventually lead India and all Indians to Swaraj" (Nicholson, 123). Gandhi and Gandhism have been viewed by these novelists according to their perspective or understanding drawing individual conclusions through the exploration of the various facets of Gandhism like Truth, Non-violence, non-cooperation, Ends and means, emancipation of women, eradication of untouchability and love for the downtrodden and the poor. By placing the ideology of the Mahatma in the forefront, the novelists have attempted to bring Gandhiji's teachings directly to the reading public. Of all those above-mentioned novels, only two novels namely *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao and *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R. K. Narayan have been taken up for analysis. In both these novels, the impact of Gandhi reigns supreme, for Gandhi is the dominant character, though he appears in person only in Narayan's novel. All the characters in both novels talk of Gandhiji and his teachings.

### *Kanthapura*

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is the story of the impact of Gandhi's name and ideas on an obscure Indian village. Raja Rao, a child of the Gandhian Era, is keen on showing how even in the remote villages, the new patriotic feeling fused with traditional religious faith results in the re-discovery of the Indian soul and how the Gandhian impact transforms an entire community. Gandhiji does not appear as a character in the novel, but his spirit pervades the whole story. His very name has magic in it, for it brings to life a whole village out of its age-old somnolence. The

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villagers take an active part in the political events. The novelist gives us an insight into the appalling social conditions of our villages during the course of his narrative. He discloses how “Gandhi tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of our people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in one lifetime” (Narasimhaiah 235). At a crucial moment, he came on the Indian scene and proved to be a savior to India’s destitute millions. His advent was described by Nehru rather evocatively in his *The Discovery of India* as:

“He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths, like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes.... he did not descend from the top, he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition.... The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth ... always keeping the welfare of the masses in view. But fear of the landlord’s agent, fear of the money-lender, fear of unemployment and starvation, which were always on the threshold. It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi’s quiet and determined voice was raised...” (P. 299).

### **Gandhi’s Leadership**

Gandhiji was born on 2 October 1869 in Porbandar a town in Gujarat. His father was the Prime Minister of the place and his mother was a very religious lady who imprinted into the mind of her son at an early age that Truth was the greatest virtue and any deviation from it would be ‘a human falling’. At the age of sixty-two, Gandhiji recalled:

“Whatever purity you see in me is derived from my mother, not from my father” (Nanda 17).

After studying Law in London, Gandhiji went to South Africa and soon got involved in the struggle for the rights of the Indians residing there against the oppressive Government of General Smuts. During the struggle, he developed his political and social theories which were based on the works of Ruskin, Tolstoy and the Gita. His political and social theories comprised of Ahimsa – non-violence, Swadeshi self-reliance and Satyagraha – Truth Force. He did embark on the epic struggle: the freedom for all Indians, with the aid of these weapons. He soon became the leader of the Congress Party and many of the political leaders like Nehru and Patel accepted

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the Gandhian way of freedom. Tagore went to the extent of bestowing on Gandhiji the name “the Mahatma meaning the ‘Great Soul’:

“To the Mahatma elevation of India’s dignity did not only comprise of political liberty; he was bent on the improvement of rural structure of society... he fought for the abolition of the stigma of untouchability which cursed the lives of millions” (P 13).

Throughout his life, Gandhiji worked for the removal of many social and moral evils like untouchability, casteism, communalism, dowry system, etc. Ultimately, he became a martyr for the noble cause of religious amity when Godse shot him dead on 30 January 1948. Though Gandhiji was dead, his disciples felt that the life and teachings of Gandhiji have acted as a leaven on their lives and that the Indians have been raised out of dust by the Mahatma. Gandhiji believed that each human being should be guided by some principles and ideals. People respect Gandhi even today, many years after his death, for he exemplified in his life what a true leader should be. Though the Mahatma himself remarked that he did not claim to have brought out any new principle or doctrine, Gandhi as a distinct influence on the Indian Intellectual can be discerned in the works of numerous journalists, political thinkers, social reformers, philosophers, educationalists as well as literary artists. In the words of I. Sundaram, “Gandhi’s philosophy is largely based on morality and religion and his philosophy and political technique were only corollaries of his religious and moral principles” (P. 6). To him, political freedom was not an end but only a means for the emergence of a better type of individual and for a better ordering of society. K.R.S. Iyengar comments:

“The Gandhian theory and practice of Satyagraha directly issued from his acute sense of personal moral responsibility for our day to day actions, irrespective of the distant goals” (P. 225).

The Mahatma not only wanted everyone to become a Satyagrahi but also wanted to reconstruct society on the basis of Satyagraha, of Truth and non-violence. His unremitting, untiring crusade against social inequality and the humiliating conditions to which backward

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sections and untouchables were exposed is epoch-making. He stood up as a great prophet of human equality and regarded women as the incarnation of Ahimsa and personification of self-sacrifice thereby improving the status of women in Indian society.

### ***Kanthapura* as a “Gandhipurana”**

Such a Great Soul – the Mahatma has become the subject matter of several of the Indo-Anglian novels. He is shown to be recurring presence in Indian English fiction and he is used in different way to suit the design of each writer. As Prof. N. N. Banerji has put it, “the Indo-Anglian novelists have been profoundly influenced by Gandhi and his ideas, but I have not come across his own personal presence as in R.K.Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*” (P 7). The whole gamut of Gandhian revolution is described in a microscopic way in *Kanthapura*. The novel is nothing but “an unforgettable picture of the impact of Gandhian ideology of non-violence, non-co-operation on an obscure village in South India” (Naik 40). It is set in the 1930’s when the spark of genuine nationalism and awakening swept throughout the country, wiping out all barriers – communal, religious and intellectual. K.R.S. Iyengar describes *Kanthapura* as a “Gandhipurana” for though Gandhi’s god-like presence is not visible anywhere, he operates behind everybody’s thoughts and ideas. His spirit pervades the whole story.

The novel *Kanthapura* is a tale showing Gandhi’s charismatic effect on a small obscure village, Kanthapura which responds wonderfully to his call for non-co-operation. The Mahatma is not directly presented as one of the characters in the novel but the entire action is sustained by his spirit. The author Raja Rao creates an idealized character Moorthy, after the image of Gandhiji. Moorthy puts in practice whatever is said by the Mahatma and that induces the Kanthapurians to regard him as the Mahatma himself. He is considered as an “avatar”. He awakens the social and political consciousness of the villagers. The villagers organize a volunteer corps and celebrate religious festivals which aimed at “creating a spirit of service to community and a sense of commitment to the achievement of India’s political freedom” (Cawasjee 35). Like Gandhiji, Moorthy abandons riches for Gandhiji had said:

“don’t be attached to riches, for riches

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create passion, and passions create attachment  
and attachment hides the face of Truth”

(Kanthapura 22)

Moorthy remained unmarried and even Ratna’s presence does not affect him in any way. Thus, he is referred to by the Kanthapurians as the “saint of our village”. Like the Mahatma, he lives for Truth and Ahimsa. He is imbued with all the humanitarian qualities that Sankar, the advocate says, “I have found no better Gandhist” (P 135). In one instance, when Moorthy is arrested, advocates and barristers want to defend him. But Moorthy firmly says, “Between Truth and me no one shall come... I shall speak that which Truth prompteth and Truth needeth no defence” (P125). At some other instance, Moorthy addresses the villagers and request them to “remember always the path we follow is the path of the spirit and with truth and non-violence and love shall we add to the harmony of the world” (181). How Moorthy has been impressed by Gandhiji forms an interesting anecdote of the novel.” One day he seen a vision, a vision of the Mahatma, mighty and God-beaming, and stealing between the volunteers Moorthy had got on to the platform, and he stood by the Mahatma... and stood by one of the fanners and whispered, ‘Brother, the next is me’. And the fanner fanned on and the Mahatma spoke on and Moorthy looked from the audience to the Mahatma and from the Mahatma to the audience and he said to himself, ‘There is in it something of the silent communion of the ancient books” (52).

Moorthy took the fan from one of the volunteers and fanned Gandhiji, “... and beneath the fan came a voice deep and stirring that went out to the hearts of those men and women and came streaming back through the thrumming air, and went through the fan and the hair and the nails of Moorthy into the very limbs and Moorthy shivered... “(52). Moorthy listened attentively to Gandhi’s speech: “There is but one force in life and that is Truth and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind and there is but one God in life and that is the God of all... “(53). Moorthy was much impressed and he cried and with creeping came peace in his heart. He saw the sandal and the foot of the Mahatma and he decided that that was his place. He put forth his hands and shouted, “Mahatma Gandhi Kijai” and then he jumped on to the platform, fell at the feet of the Mahatma saying. “I am your slave”. He promised the Mahatma that he would

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throw away his foreign clothes and stop going to foreign universities. The Mahatma commanded him to help his country by “going and working among the dumb millions of the villages”. Moorthy carries out the Mahatma’s words and walks out of college “a Gandhi’s man”. In Kanthapura, he rouses the people to take part in the National movement. Instead of regular religious functions, Gandhi bhajans, talks of Swaraj and Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar take place in the Kanthapurishwari Temple.

The villagers came to know Gandhiji, not as a political leader, not as one standing against foreign rule but as a Krishna or a Rama. “They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring as Swaraj, the Mahatma” (257), says the narrator. Thus, to the villagers, Gandhiji is their Krishna, the demon killer or Rama, the slayer of Ravana. They look upon the Mahatma as “a savior come to restore their self-respect and a radicalist come to destroy their age-old caste system and pollute their religion” (Jain 22). They, men and women, dared baton charges, bayonet charges, gunfire, court arrest and suffer imprisonment under the spell of those cries which has a magic effect on them – “Mahatma Gandhi Ki-jai” and “Vande Madaram”. Such is the influence of Gandhiji over the villagers.

The impact of Gandhi on the villages is felt throughout the story of the novel. All the major political activities of the Congress during the time of Gandhi are given in *Kanthapura*, for example, the Dandhi march of Gandhi and his followers in 1930 to inaugurate the Civil Disobedience Movement; the response of the villagers to the movement by way of launching Satyagraha, observing non-cooperation by not paying taxes and showing disloyalty to the Government; the formation of the Congress Committee in remote villages and their constructive programmes; the decision of Gandhi to attend the Second Round Table Conference and above all, the Mahatma’s all pervading, permeating influence on the nation which runs through the entire story. The Gandhian ideals not only revitalize the spiritual springs within the Kanthapurians but also teach the peasants to depend on their own inner strength and courage and inner resources. Though Gandhi is believed to be an incarnation of Siva and looked upon as Sri Rama who will save Sita (India) from the evil clutches of Ravana (The English), there is a group of people in Kanthapura who pass disparaging remarks about the great national leader. Bhatta,

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the money – lender would have nothing to do with Gandhi bhajans. “What is all this city-chatter about?” he would ask. He dismisses the national movement as “this Gandhi Vagabondage” and “this Gandhi business”. He joins hands with the Swami in excommunicating Moorthy, the miniature Gandhi of the village. Moorthy’s mother Narsamma curses Gandhiji bitterly. Among the women of the village, it is waterfall Venkamma who speaks vehemently against Moorthy and Gandhi.

The presence of the Mahatma is always felt throughout the novel. Range Gowda tells Moorthy “You are our Gandhi.” When Patel Range Gowda speaks fiercely against Bade Khan, the policeman, Moorthy reminds him of the Mahatma’s words to love even one’s enemies. Moorthy explains to him Gandhi’s principles of Ahimsa. Moorthy makes Range Gowda promise Ahimsa, and to speak Truth if he wanted to become a member of the Congress. In Range Gowda’s reply, too, he talks of the Mahatma, “... All I know is that what you told me about the Mahatma is very fine, and the Mahatma is a holy man, and if the Mahatma says what you say, let the Mahatma’s words be the word of God” (Kanthapura 103).

Again, when the policeman arrest Moorthy, the villagers get wild and try to resist the policemen from doing so. Moorthy comes forward and says,

“Brothers, in the name of Mahatma,  
Let there be peace and love and order...  
if these gentlemen want to arrest us, let them  
Give yourself upto them. That is the true spirit  
of the Satyagrahi” (P 122).

When Moorthy relates to them the Mahatma’s Salt Satyagraha, instantly the Kanthapurians ask,

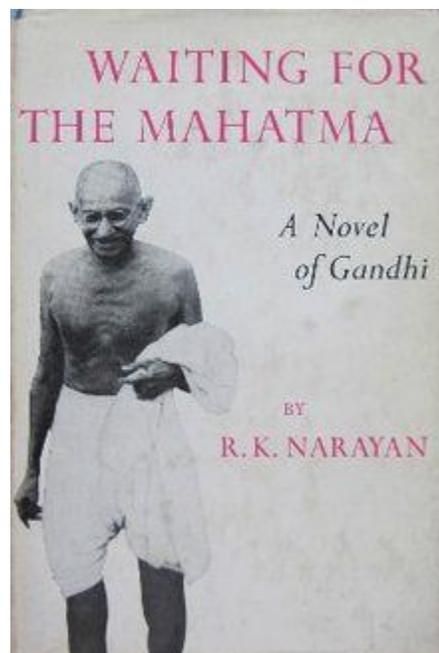
“And when shall we start to march like  
the Mahatma?”

Nanjamma says,

“.... I do not imagine the Mahatma like  
a man or a god, but like the Sahyadri  
mountains, blue, high, inde....” (176).

When the villagers picket the toddy shops, they plead with the coolies not to enter the toddy shops “in the name of the Mahatma”. The name of the Mahatma has a magic in it and encourages them to face difficulties bravely. “Gandhi Mahatma ki jai” and “Vande Mataram” are the vital war cries of the non-violent soldiers of the Congress Movement. At the end of the novel when Gandhiji is said to have gone to attend the Round Table Conference prior to the Gandhi-Irvin Pact, the tale of Sri Ram’s exile, the invasion of Lanka to bring back Sita, after killing Ravana, is invoked in comparison. “Thus, Mahatma Gandhi is the invisible hero of *Kanthapura* and the Gandhian image is convincingly integrated into the main action, conferring on it the status of a myth” (Rao 42).

### *Waiting for the Mahatma*



*Waiting for the Mahatma* is R. K. Narayan's only novel dealing directly with Gandhiji's Satyagraha and his assassination. Unlike in *Kanthapura* the Mahatma is one of the characters in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. He makes his appearance only at two brief instances – one earlier when Sriram the hero starts out as a freedom fighter and later when he blesses Sriram's impending marriage before going to his death. The moment chosen for the novel is "the eve of the world war with a tremendous destructive potentiality; the milieu is the placid Malgudi society; the nation at large is seething with discontent and frustration; and the hero is a pampered youth, unrefined and ignorant. Such is the stuff waiting for the magical touch of the Mahatma whose only means are spiritual Truth and non-violence" (Rao 85). More than depicting the Mahatma as a holy man, R. K. Narayan is interested in exposing and satirizing the section of the followers of Gandhiji who pretend to follow his ways and seek to please him as a contrivance only for assuming power and amassing wealth. In the portrayal of Bharati, too, there is irony for she is shown as a blind follower of Gandhi. She courts arrest without flinching and is imbued with the Gandhian fearlessness.

### **Emphasis on Gandhi Himself**

R. K. Narayan's emphasis in the novel is not on the Gandhian influence but on Gandhi himself and his relation to small things in life. As a person, he rings true in the novel. He is a humane, kind and benevolent person capable of giving affection and care even during the gravest preoccupation. He is "Bapu" to Sriram, Bharati and to many of his disciples. It is proper to conclude with Prof. P. N. Bhatt's words that R. K. Narayan considered the Gandhian impact sufficient to bring out the love and romance of Sriram and Bharati.

Thus, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* mirror the social temper of the Gandhian Era and Gandhian ideology.

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Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.  
Professor, Head & Chairperson  
School of English & Foreign Languages and  
Department of English & Comparative Literature  
Madurai Kamaraj University  
Madurai – 625 021  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[aschelliah@yahoo.com](mailto:aschelliah@yahoo.com)

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