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CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN IN R.K.NARAYAN'S *WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA*

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ABSTRACT

Bharati is lover, disciple and Guru, all rolled into one. She is quite modern in breaking through the shell of conservatism and choosing to be a freedom-fighter under the leadership of Gandhi. Bharati is not only the lent disciple of Gandhiji but also a woman who exhibits a painful sensitivity to the agonies and miseries of the poverty-stricken masses residing mostly in villages without the basic needs and comforts of life. This trait of sympathy in her character strengthens her resolve to serve the people with greater involvement. The virtues of self-abnegation, self-abandonment, humanitarianism and altruism find powerful expression in her character. Sriram's Granny is a lovable, traditional and superstitious old woman. Age and experience have taught her worldly wisdom and farsightedness. She has a mature mind.

Narayan, endowed as he is with a comprehensive life-vision, integrates in this novel fact and fiction into an artistic whole that is marked by throbbing creative vigour, graphics and gripping picture of the political happenings and upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s during the mighty struggle for independence. The story of this powerfully evocative novel revolves around the love between Sriram and Bharati, who are waiting with nerve-wracking tension and anxiety for the permission of Mahatma Gandhi to marry.

Bharati is lover, disciple and Guru, all rolled into one. She is quite modern in breaking through the shell of conservatism and choosing to be a freedom-fighter under the leadership of Gandhi. Vandana R.Singh observes, "Bharati [...] comes a full way out of the traditional inhibitions and chooses a public life dedicating herself to the service of Gandhi" (31). Nationalism is in her very blood. Her father died during the 1920 movement, just when she was born. When Gandhi, who had come down to south, came to know of it, made himself her godfather. It was he who named her Bharati which means the daughter of India. After the death of her mother, the local Sevak Sangh adopted her. Her association with the Sevak Sangh helps energize her incipient spirit of service, and the Sangh provides Bharati plenty of opportunities to hone and test her interactive skill, cultivate the art of communication and winning the confidence of the indigent villagers, and understand with sympathy their problems. This grounding in the service of the people stands her in good stead when she comes under the magnetic spell of Gandhi whose life is one of rigorous and uncompromising simplicity and discipline.

Barati becomes the devout and devoted disciple of the Mahatma. She standards to his needs during his visit to Malgudi. Gandhi's stress on non-violence, absolute truth, purity of thought and action, untouchability, love for all and absence of bitterness and hatred in the heart towards the British appeals to

her. She adheres to the daily routine without fail, which Gandhi himself follows strictly: early morning walk, spinning a certain length, reading Bhagavad Gita and prayer. Like Gandhi, she attaches much importance to ahimsa and wears only the sandals made out of the skin of animal that has died a natural death. She does not mind walking barefoot uphill to meet Sriram as there is some inexplicable delay in getting leather Wardha. She retorts spiritedly when Sriram expresses concern about walking barefoot: "We are not born with sandals on our feet [. . .]" (WM 99). She adds, "India's three hundred and sixty million walk barefoot" (WM 100). There is an implicit suggestion here that Bharati is not only the lent disciple of Gandhiji but also a woman who exhibits a painful sensitivity to the agonies and miseries of the poverty-stricken masses residing mostly in villages without the basic needs and comforts of life. This trait of sympathy in her character strengthens her resolve to serve the people with greater involvement.

She accompanies Gandhi during his visit to the villages to study the famine conditions at first hand and "put hope and courage into the sufferers" (WM 88). It is "a mission of mercy" (WM 88). Narayan refers to her role in the Quit India Movement. She brings a can of paint and brush, and asks Sriram to spread Gandhi's message among the plantations and write it on the walls in the villages. She is always "prepared for any sacrifice" (WM 94). As the true disciple of Gandhi, she is fearless, and this aspect of her character is illustrated when Bharati goes uphill to speak to Sriram and tells him that she is neither afraid of him nor the cobras, "I am not afraid of [...] I am not afraid of cobras either, or the lonely road" (WM 100). With religious zeal Bharati carries out Gandhi's instructions which to her, have an inviolable sanctity of their own. She surrenders herself to the police, as directed by Gandhi, and is kept in Old Slaughter House as a prisoner along with other women. Any deviation, however significant it may be, amounts, in her opinion, to sacrilege. She administers a rude shock to Sriram by flatly refusing to meet him secretly without the knowledge and permission of the jail authorities. Because Bapu has always said that it is dishonourable to assume subterfuges" (WM 1172).

Immediately after her release from the prison, she leaves for Naokali. She is such a dedicated, fanatically service-minded disciple that Mahatma requires her service immediately because communal riots between Hindus and Muslims have broken out. He is urging the people to bury the hatchet, and trying his best to bring about peace between communities. As Jagadish puts it, "He is actually making the lion and the lamb eat off the same plate" (W111 231). Bharati joins Gandhi in his "mission of peace" (WM 23 I).which takes her to East Bengal, Bihar and other riot-hit areas. Later, she gives to Sriram an elaborate and heart-rending account of the sufferings of the people and of death and destruction caused by frenzied mobs. She writhes in agony and is on the point of breaking down when she recalls how women are the worst-hit and how many of them have lost their honour, their home, their children (WM 243). She wonders how human beings could do such impossible things to other human beings (WM244). She was with Mahatma for a year. She boldly accompanied him, though, at first, he was reluctant to take her to such places. There were, of course, threats to the life of the Mahatma and to the honour of women-followers. But there was little fear in them. Bharati was prepared to end her life if any unexpected thing happened to her. The virtues of self-abnegation, self-abandonment, humanitarianism and altruism find powerful expression in her character. She has the resilience and resoluteness, capacity and confidence to rise to any difficult occasion and successfully fulfil any given task. Gandhi knows it. And that is why she has been asked to take full charge of many orphaned, refugee children. She treats them as if they were her own children. She is always seen attending on children. Gandhi rightly remarks, "Bharati, I hope your children are flourishing: You are a mother to thirty already, what a blessing" (WM 250). The fact that he attaches so importance to children is brought out in his remark: "God reveals himself to us in the shape of children [...]. "(WM 250). They do not know whether they are Muslim children or Hindu children. So they have given them only the names of flowers and birds (WM 245). Besides attending on children, she has a great deal to say to a lot of miscellaneous men who come in search of her (WM 241). In other words, she is equipped with sufficient mental resources to do-to use a now popular modern idiom-'multitasking'.

Bharati's role, as a lover, is interwoven with her role as Gandhi's disciple as well as her role as 'guru'. It is said that every man has multiple identities, as stressed by N.Vaidhyathan in his reference to Amartya Sen's concept of multiple identities in his book *Identity and Violence* ("My Self, Yourself" 26). This is quite true

of Bharati, as portrayed by Narayan. Bharati fuses in herself her personal interests as a lover and national interests as the disciple of Gandhi. Commenting on this fusion, Rajalakshmi says, "Bharati [...] finally masters and achieves a dynamic balance between the claims of private individuality and those of public responsibility" (41). She emerges as a lover only after Sriram encounters her as a Sevak Sangh Volunteer jingling the money box for donations for Gandhiji's Harijan Fund. But her love blossoms in her heart only gradually as Sriram persists in pursuing her with unflagging spirit and undiminished zeal. He follows her even into the camp of the Mahatmaji like a man possessed.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar's comment is relevant: "Bharati herself is a masterful young heroine, a Malgudi Portia rich only in her natural endowments, whereas Sriram can easily qualify for a Malgudi Bassanio". Sriram, a twenty year old Brahmin, is struck by Bharati's prettiness, youthfulness, sparkling eyes, and litheness of movement. She "seems to move with the lightest of steps like a dance" (WM 23). To him, it is love-at-first sight, most exciting and over-powering. There springs instantly in his mind a wild hope that "she would let him touch her hand" (WM 23). Love spins him like a toy and he is willing to be spun. He is not even vaguely aware then that this chance-meeting with Bharati is going to change the entire of his life. He describes her as one who is "slender and young with eyes that sparkled with happiness".

In *Mahatma* Bharati has perfect control over her emotional self. But in Sriram emotions run riot. To quote Krishna Kant Singh, "He is a man of passionate emotions and erotic thoughts" (81). It is remarkable on the part of Bharati to exercise self-restraint unlike Sriram in whom thoughts freely clash with thoughts, emotions with emotions. Bharati, on the other hand, cannot persuade herself to do anything without the express sanction and consent of the Mahatma. To indulge in any activity even casually or slightly suggestive of dishonourable behaviour or departure from the immediate task of fighting against the British is an act of sacrilege to Bharati. So she deliberately refrains from openly declaring her love or overtly or covertly encouraging Sriram in his love. What strikes the reader most in Bharati is there is no inner conflict in her between Love and Nation (or Gandhi). Shanta Krishnaswamy points out:

The woman who did not wish to be a full time homemaker got scant cultural support. Here Bharati is an unusual girl in unusual times. She is a trend setter who widens the female's perspectives in the nation's cause. The general fervor of the times also aids her in achieving her goals. But, it is true that Bharati loves him sincerely, though there is no open manifestation of her love or inward tension.

Bharati is very attractive literally and figuratively. On one level, she represents the renescent India-self-confident, having a positive ideology and hopes for a bright future. On another level, she represents the younger generation of women in India. In contrast to Bharati, Sriram is aggressive in his demonstration of his love. Narayan introduces a scene which clearly brings out his emotionally 'over-powering' attachment to Bharati. One revealing aspect of his love for Bharati is his strong desire to take her into his arms, and, in fact, he recollects the thrill of her touch (WM 65), as Raman does in his relationship with Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*. It is characteristic of Narayan's heroes in love who fervently and feverously-and foolishly-imagine their ladies as wives. It is Narayan's humorous and ironic way of delightfully representing his hero-lovers in contrast to the heroines who are self-possessed and never indulge in such rash, wild, stupid fantasies. Raman and Raman belong to this interesting group of frenzied romantic dreamers who let their imagination run riot. When Bharati comes uphill to meet him in the abandoned temple, Sriram, who can no longer contain the bursting passion, throws himself on her. His act is so unexpected and unpremeditated that it nearly overwhelms her. Narayan's account of the 'assault scene' arouses anxiety and concern for Bharati and anger against Sriram's violent manner of "love-making" (WM 135) which is an attempt, though not preplanned, to molest a woman who trusts him so much. He swears like a fanatical romantic hero: "I will be your slave. I will do anything you ask me to do for you. I will buy you all the things in the world" (WM 132). Strangely enough, Bharati, forgetting herself for the moment, is quite impulsively responsive: "She wriggled in his grasp for a moment and at the same time seemed to respond to his caresses" (WM 132). Srirani is completely beside himself with excitement and elation, and confidently declares that no one can stop him and Bharati from marrying. "This is how gods marry" (WM 132), he asserts.

Sriram's reference to god's manner of marrying is a desperate attempt on his part to lend credence to his clearly senseless act ("He behaved like an idiot", comments Narayan (WM 132) and, more immortally, to imply that their 'marriage' carries the 'divine sanction and blessings' as opposed to Bharati's insistence on the sanction of a human being, Gandhi. As Nazar Singh Sidhu interprets it, he "consummates the marriage on a psychic plane" (104). She tells him in no uncertain terms that she is not his wife, as he foolishly claims, and she "must wait for Babu's sanction" (WM 133), and adds that she cannot marry him if he does not sanction it.

Bharati is the disciple of Gandhi as well as the 'Guru' of Sriram. It is a new role, a new task assigned by the Mahatma. "Remember that she is your Guru and think of her with reverence and respect", Gandhi tells Sriram (WM 93) Bharati remarks in another place that she is his Guru, and expects him to be afraid of her (WM 100). Even before Gandhi elevates Bharati to the level of Guru, Sriram has expressed his wish to be her student: "Why don't you take me as your pupil? I want to do something good. I want to talk to poor people" (WM 59). This 'Guru-Sisya' relationship is integral to the fiction's basic theme of love and nationalism.

The novel, in a way, is concerned with the 'growing-up' of the hero. Bharati's role in the growth of the hero—from an ignorant, vain, proud, recluse, self-conscious, caste-conscious and irritable young man from Malgudi to a passionate lover, freedom-fighter and follower of Gandhi—needs no emphasis. It is his all-consuming passion for Bharati, which leads him, like a 'kindly light', out of the darkness of accumulated, sickening ignorance and crusted prejudices, and converts him into an active, enthusiastic and enlightened fighter for the national cause. In other words, it is Bharati who brings about this remarkable metamorphosis in Sriram. It is, to borrow the phrase from Ranchan and Kataria, "transformation via the feminine" (5). Bharati serves as an agent of transformation. Taking note of the stages in the transportation of Sriram" (90) in his R.K.Narayan: A critical Appreciation, William Walsh recognizes the vital contribution of Bharati to the maturity of Sriram: "His maturity lies in accepting the stability and direction offered by the stronger character of the young woman (91). Sriram is deeply attached to Bharati. He speaks truth when he makes an instantaneous, emotional confession to Gandhi "I like to be where Bharati is" (WM 70). Narayan comments, "It was the unrelenting e of his subconscious desires that jerked the sentence out of his lips (WM 70).

Bharati is quite aware of the difficulties she has to face in the process of his evolution as patriot and man. She disagrees with Bapu when he remarks that Sriram will be alright if he is fully himself (WM 68), and says to him. "He should change from being himself, if he is to come to any good" (WM 69). What she means is that Sriram should be prepared to blast his mental blocks and shed some of his habits and propensities like sluggishness, lethargy, idleness, anger and lack of patience which impede his growth. It requires a thorough revamping of his self. True to her role as Guru, Bharati virtually teaches him nuances of spinning. In this, she proves herself "to be a task-mistress of no mean order" (WM 98). Under her strict supervision, he learns to spin yam free from entanglement and becomes "a master spinner" (WM 98). Bharati insists that he must speak only the truth in "the great presence" (WM 61) of the Mahatma. She disabuses his mind of wrong notion of villages, which he owes to the various Tamil films he has seen. It is a shocking experience for Sriram to find some of the villages are hardly a cluster of huts, where people are leading a miserable life because of their poverty, drought and famine. Bharati, then, observes, "But learn, young man, this is really a village [...]" (WM 88) and there are thousands and thousands of such villages in the country (WM 88). Thus Sriram has to learn this bitter truth about the villages from his Guru, Bharati.

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes, It is Bharati who makes a patriot and a man of Sriram, and in marriage he is certain to find in her the saviour strength of shakti." (373). But K.Radha quietly agrees with M.K.Naik's 'aptness' of his comment that "Sriram's sudden conversion into a freedom fighter is unconvincing, because he is so obviously interested in Bharati and not in Bharat-mata (Mother India)." But one may say that the very fact that he is drawn into the freedom struggle is ample evidence of his transformation. In spite of his brave attempts at self-development, Bharati continues to figure in his thoughts and trouble his conscience as she has become one with his consciousness. He measures the rightness or wrongness of his acts in terms of the rigorous norms of conduct set by Bharati. For instance, when he is in jail, he rues his 'friendship' with Jagadish but chooses to blame Bharati for being a 'tough Guru', for being "such an uncompromising zealot" (WM 200). He reflects further, "Everything that she thought or said or expected was set in grooves and hard to

practice" (WM 200). Later, he refuses to give the required undertaking to get his release because Bharati will disapprove of his degrading act of sneaking out of prison (WM 215).

Chastened by his experience, Sriram becomes saner in his perception of Bharati, though he cannot remove her from his mind. He is over-awed by Bharati's reputation and popularity as a selfless volunteer. On seeing her marvellous, noble-hearted and highly commendable service to the refugee children-as the mother of the orphaned children-Sriram is, for a moment, filled with a sense of fright, and wonders whether he is really worthy of her hand. "He was frightened of her. She seemed too magnificent to be his wife [...]" (WM 246), Narayan comments. This is a revealing fact of his self-growth. It shows his ability to view things in their right perspective without being clouded by his emotions. The aptness of the title lies in the fact that Bharati and Sriram wait for the sanction of the Mahatma. The word 'waiting' is suggestive of patience, and the lovers have been patiently waiting for his permission. Gandhi withholds his consent to them to marry in order to test the depth and sincerity of their love and attachment, their capacity to preserve the purity of their relationship, and endure the travails of the freedom struggle. Bharati emerges out of this 'test of patience' unscathed but not Sriram who allows himself to be assailed by doubts and suspicions, conflicting reflections and emotional outbursts. In the title *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the term 'waiting' occurs like rhythmic beat in several places and on different occasions, gathering momentum, quickening its pace, speeding towards the decisive moment of the 'great waiting' of the heroine and hero till it exhausts itself in the tragic finale - the assassination of Gandhi. If the huge crowds, school children and office-goers wait to see and hear Gandhi, Sriram's grandmother and a number of old persons "cheerfully await their death" (WM 203) in Benaras. The reference to their 'cheerful waiting' for death ironically foreshadows in a shockingly opposite way the impending doom awaiting the Mahatma and the nation.

Narayan's master-stroke in the effective use of 'wait' or 'waiting' and his mastery of the art of building-up the tempo may be seen in the concluding part of the fiction. Unable to withstand the pressure of Sriram, Bharati has tried hard to get a chance to speak to Gandhi about their marriage. But Gandhi has been busy tackling the refugee problem, and Bharati is also frustrated by 'human interruptions' in her attempt to meet him. Narayan gives a vivid description of the lovers' meeting with Gandhi. They are on tenterhooks. The very future of their relationship as husband and wife depends on this momentous meeting with the Mahatma. Sriram tells Mahatma in an emotion-soaked voice: "We are waiting for your blessed permission to marry [...]" (WM 252). Narayan's narrative is heading towards the inevitable tragic end of which Gandhi is instinctively conscious. He says that they need not put off their marriage, and they carry his blessings whether he comes or not (WM 253). It implies that they need not wait any longer for him.

The long wait of Bharati and Sriram ends at last on a tragic note. Bharati's erstwhile roles come to a close. A new and a more challenging and demanding role-as wife of Sriram and mother of orphaned refugee children-is awaiting her. Bharati loses her humane and lovable mentor and 'father' in the death of the Mahatma. It may not be easy for her to erase the haunting memories of the horrific end of Gandhi from her mind. But the experience she has gained as lover and 'Guru' of Sriram and disciple of Gandhi will inspire her to lead a fully satisfied and happy life and dedicate herself with greater involvement to the cause of the poor and the helpless. Mahatma is more than a delightful fusion of political reality and fictional vision. S.R. Ramteke rightly observes:

Narayan touches upon the problem of orphans. Gandhi has taken up in his life. Bharati refuses to marry Sriram unless she gets sanction from the Mahatma. In the end Gandhi gives his consent for their marriage but with an additional responsibility that Bharati be mother and father to thirty children, which she gladly takes upon herself and accepts the motherhood of the orphans. This is a challenging role Bharati plays much against the social traditions prevalent in the society. Another important female character in this novel is Sriram's Granny. She is a lovable, traditional and superstitious old woman. She is sharp-tongued and forthright in her opinions like Bharati. Sriram says of her, 'You have the same style of talk as my grandmother. She is as sharp-tongued as you are'.¹ Sriram's Granny has a personality of gracing quality. Age and experience have taught her worldly wisdom and farsightedness. She has a mature mind. William Walsh states:

A quick note summons into being the gruff and vital granny, a woman of extreme devotion, touchiness, orthodoxy, and individuality.

At the end of the *Waiting for the Mahatma* "there is a loss in the notational level in the death of the Mahatma, but there is a sense of fulfillment in Sriram's personal life". It is Narayan's attempt, through linking Bharati and Sram with the Mahatma, to come to tenets with the eternal question of life and death-life that is constantly reviving and resurrecting itself, and death that is ever irresistible and rigorous in the enforcement of its edicts and ensures its dominance over the lowly and the mighty, the unholy and the unholy.

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