

Patriotism Vs Self-Passion: The Politics of the Ordinary in R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* from the Lens of New Historicism

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ABSTRACT

Historical accounts of the 1942 Quit India Movement (August Kranti) often portray it through a patriotic, nationalist lens, claiming that mass participation was driven by nationalist fervor. However, R.K. Narayan's novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* reveals a different, grassroots reality by capturing the politics of the ordinary. This paper examines Narayan's narrative through the theoretical lens of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism to question grand narratives of history using literary documents.

By treating the literary text as a credible socio-historical document, this study unveils the underlying personal motivations that drove mass participation in the Quit India Movement. Through character studies of Sriram — whose involvement in the movement is purely a romantic pursuit — and the Panchayat Chairman — whose devotion to Gandhi and the movement is driven by future political ambitions — the paper argues that the masses were largely motivated by personal gain rather than ideology or patriotism.

The principal aim of the study is to deconstruct the accepted reality of written history and to bring to light the uncensored lived realities during the Movement, by analyzing credible historical archives alongside literary documents.

Keywords: New Historicism; Quit India Movement; Self-passion; Patriotism; Nationalism; Grand Narratives.

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The Quit India Movement, which was described by the then Viceroy Linlithgow as “by far the most serious rebellion since 1857,” stands unique in the history of the Republic of India for various reasons. The most striking one is that, for the first time, Gandhi was becoming increasingly militant and convinced of the need to embrace a mass movement to pressure the British to accept the Indian demand for freedom. Addressing the Congress cadres on the night of 8 August at Bombay, Gandhi said,

I am not going to be satisfied with anything short of complete freedom. Maybe, he will propose the abolition of the salt tax, the drink evil, etc. But I will say, ‘Nothing less than freedom.’ Here is a mantra, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The mantra is: ‘Do or Die.’ We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall

not live to see the perpetuation of slavery. (360)

The very next day, the government arrested all the main leaders, including Gandhi. The leaderless movement became directionless. Like a parabolic trajectory, it began with a non-violent character and, in its middle phase, was marked by violent activities such as hartals, processions, strikes in factories, schools, and colleges, and demonstrations. In the final phase, it returned to its initial non-violent character.

All the above-mentioned information is documented in the country's history and is echoed throughout schools, colleges, and even in coffee shops with a tone of romanticized enthusiasm. However, there is another version of this movement, more rooted in reality, which is seldom echoed in these places except in certain literary discussions. Against the backdrop of the famous fictional town of Malgudi, R.K. Narayan, the legendary Indian writer, portrayed

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the life of Sriram, a young man who became caught between patriotism and self-interest during the Quit India Movement, and brought to light the real and psychological struggles of the masses who embraced the movement not for patriotism but for personal benefit. Sriram joined the movement and actively participated in its activities, such as painting walls with Quit India slogans, spinning khadi, and boycotting foreign goods; however, his main objective was not absolute freedom like Gandhi's or that of other frontline leaders. His only aim was to marry Bharati, a young woman working alongside Gandhi's followers.

Questioning accepted history through a fictional work may appear less credible from a reader's perspective. This study aims to bridge the aforementioned gap by viewing the entire narrative through the lens of New Historicism, a literary theory proposed by the American literary historian Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Greenblatt used literary texts to argue that during the Elizabethan period, the upper class practiced self-fashioning. In the introduction, Greenblatt justified treating literary works as credible sources for exploring the written past. He states,

The literary text remains the central object of my attention in this study of self-fashioning in part because, as I hope these chapters will demonstrate, great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture and in part because, by inclination and training, whatever interpretive powers I possess are released by the resonances of literature (5).

By analyzing R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* through the lens of New Historicism, it becomes evident that most of the masses who joined the movement were less informed about it and were engaged in boycotting the British for personal reasons. Sriram joined the movement to marry Bharati. Bharati joined the movement because Gandhi was her godfather. Some individuals, such as the Panchayat Chairman who welcomed Gandhi during his Malgudi visit, appeared to be patriots in Gandhi's eyes, though their primary intention was merely to impress him. During Gandhi's arrival, the Chairman was very particular about displaying himself as a patriot. He was neither a man of Khadi culture nor a follower of Nehru or Patel; he altered his house to please Gandhi and other Congress leaders so he could gain future political benefits.

He had effected a few alterations in his house, such as substituting Khaddar hangings for the gaudy chintz that had adorned his doorways and windows, and had taken down the pictures of hunting gentry, vague gods, and kings. He had even the temerity to remove the picture of George V's wedding and substitute pictures of Maulana Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari, and Annie Besant. He had ordered his works manager to secure within a given time 'all the available portraits of our national leaders', a wholesale order which was satisfactorily executed; and all the other pictures were taken down and sent off to the basement room. (47)

From the perspective of Gandhi or the Congress cadres, he is considered a patriot. The autobiographies and histories of these renowned leaders may depict him as a patriot, believing in his false hospitality. Although this is a fictional narrative, the story of the nation and its collective mindset was largely the same. Fiction reflects life; no author can escape real events, especially when writing a story deeply rooted in ground realities. Greenblatt argues that analyzing all discourses across diverse texts is essential to producing a more credible narrative.

Understanding how characters adapt and improvise during the narrative is essential for a comprehensive study of New Historicism in any text. However, history books are often monotonous and overly data-centric, frequently failing to reveal the improvisational aspects of the narrative.

Improvisation is a mode of identity-making through which individuals and groups retain their power—appropriating the structures of the relation in order to validate their claims and co-opting resistance in order to manage it, and, thereby, creating their own identity. (210)

All the main characters in the novel adapt their personas by drawing on elements of the August Kranti. Sriram is the primary improviser in the fictional town of Malgudi. He is not a follower of Gandhian non-violence or the Khadi movement. Instead, he adopts the persona of a patriot and freedom fighter to pursue his personal goal of marrying Bharati. He adopted the language, dress, habits, and actions of nationalists involved in the Satyagraha movement to construct his own narrative and manipulate the dominant discourse for his own self-centered ends. To the public, he espoused the ideological principles he had adopted

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through improvisation: "We will spin the charkhas, wear Khadi, live without luxury, and we shall have India ruled by Indians" (120). However, when his patriotism was tested during his prison days, his romantic improvisation was exposed: "He had suspended his usual rounds of lecturing, agitation, and demonstrations; he did not appear to believe he owed any duty to the country" (145).

In the narrative, Jagadish engaged in a more radical form of improvisation within the freedom movement. Following the imprisonment of important leaders such as Gandhi, numerous underground groups emerged, exploiting the movement's widespread support to advance their own ideologies. The underground movement sought to disrupt the British government's communication networks by blowing up bridges, cutting telegraph and telephone wires, and derailing trains to slow its administrative and military operations. One of the most significant contributions of the underground movement during this period was the establishment of the Secret Congress Radio. Usha Mehta served as the announcer for this organization, which helped steer the movement in a more radical direction.

Jagadish, the photographer representing the Secret Congress Radio, sought to capitalize on the momentum of the mass movement by persuading non-violent satyagrahis to participate in the underground campaign. Jagadish exemplifies subversive improvisation, exploiting the mass uprising to carry out a violent underground campaign. In doing so, he directly contravened Gandhi's core principle of non-violence.

In the latter part of the novel, Jagadish presented his album of Independence Day photographs to Sriram following his release from jail. Jagadish's discourse while presenting the album reveals that its primary purpose is not to preserve the memory of India's independence for posterity, but rather to emphasize his own fame and role in the movement. Jagadish asserts:

As a photographer, I am proud of this. Future generations can never blame me for being neglectful. I have done my best. Here is a complete history of our struggle and the final Independence Day Celebration. He included several pictures of himself in the album, portraying himself as a humble soldier. (238)

He played the radio messages of extremist leaders for Sriram, directing him to relay the information to enable violent operations. Most historical documents and archives portray these underground activities as antithetical to the main movement, overlooking the fact

that many of these radical initiatives were subversive improvisations within the broader nationalist struggle.

Examining the characters' discourses in Malgudi offers a fresh interpretation of the mass movement by challenging the monolithic narratives of the Indian Independence struggle. Official historical archives and records, constrained by political and social clutches, neglect the psychological experiences and lives of the masses as individuals, portraying the Quit India Movement as a mass uprising driven by selfless patriotism. However, this study challenges such narratives through the lens of Greenblatt's New Historicism. The concepts of self-fashioning and improvisation permit a reconsideration of the grand narrative by focusing on the micro-level experiences of the ordinary grassroots population, illustrating how a political spark evolved into a mass movement. The actions and discourses of the characters in Malgudi function as significant cultural documents, providing a realistic account of the political ideology of the time and the everyday needs and desires of the people during the August Kranti.

The characters and their discourses in the novel present an alternative view: participation in a mass movement is not always motivated solely by ideology; rather, it is primarily a combination of personal improvisation and social power dynamics. The social energy of the August Kranti was continually shaped by individuals seeking to advance their own interests. For the Panchayat Chairman, nationalist discourse serves merely as a facade to gain respect in his village and curry favor with frontline Congress leaders in pursuit of his future political ambitions. Accordingly, he fashioned himself as a nationalist. Similarly, Sriram's new interest in the charkha and khadi does not signify a boycott of English goods or support for Indian-made products; rather, it represents a romantic gesture intended to win Bharati's love and affection. He painted the village walls and grounds with Quit India slogans and confronted the timber works and plantation keepers to demonstrate his nationalist spirit. However, all of Sriram's improvisations unravelled during his imprisonment.

Before Narayan's narrative, the nation and the world largely believed that the Quit India Movement was driven by the failure of the Cripps Mission, rising prices and food shortages during the peak of the Second World War, the British evacuation from Malaya and Burma, and the arrival of Japanese armies on India's borders.

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was driven by the failure of the Cripps Mission, rising prices and food shortages during the peak of the Second World War, the British evacuation from Malaya and Burma, and the arrival of Japanese armies on India's borders. But *Waiting for the Mahatma* brings out the movement's broader background and reflects on the experiences of ordinary individuals. This perspective does not diminish the importance of patriotism or nationalist spirit; rather, it humanizes it by recognizing that history is created by flawed individuals pursuing their own passions and goals. By elevating the literary text to the status of a historical document, a New Historicist lens helps bridge the gap between reality and established narratives. This research demonstrates that beneath the national discourse and the heroic call of "Do or Die," ordinary people quietly pursued selfish, self-centered aims as they attempted to improvise their lives amidst the turbulence of a nation in the making.

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