



The Quotidian Gandhi: Ethical Practice in R.K. Narayan's Novels

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Abstract- This paper examines how Gandhian ethical principles manifest in the quotidian practices of protagonists across eight selected novels by R.K. Narayan (1935–1990). Rather than treating Gandhian thought as an abstract ideology, the study demonstrates that Narayan embeds it in everyday choices surrounding education, consumption, conflict, and spiritual seeking. The analysis reveals a spectrum of Gandhian engagement — from partial adoption to open contradiction — and argues that this complexity constitutes a sustained philosophical meditation on ethical existence in postcolonial India. The paper employs a qualitative, close-reading methodology informed by Gandhian philosophy, Indian intellectual traditions, and postcolonial theory.

Keywords- R.K. Narayan, Gandhian philosophy, Malgudi, Ahimsa, Swaraj, postcolonial fiction, ethical practice.

I. Introduction

R.K. Narayan (1906–2001) stands among the most enduring voices in Indian English literature. Over a career spanning nearly six decades, he produced a body of work remarkable in its consistency of vision and its quiet penetrating examination of human nature. At the centre of this oeuvre stands Malgudi — the fictional South Indian town that Narayan brought into being with *Swami and Friends* (1935) and continued to inhabit through *The World of Nagaraj* (1990). As Graham Greene famously noted in his preface to *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan had given him 'a second home' through Malgudi — a world simultaneously particular and universal, rooted in South Indian rhythms yet resonant with larger human truths.

Narayan wrote during a period of extraordinary historical transformation: the waning British Raj, the Independence movement, Partition, and the long aftermath of decolonisation. His most significant intellectual contemporary was Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), whose thought permeated Indian public life during Narayan's formative years and whose legacy has remained a central, if contested, element of Indian cultural discourse ever since. Existing scholarship has concentrated largely on overt Gandhian themes in specific novels — particularly *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) — while the quotidian dimension of Gandhian influence across the corpus has received comparatively little systematic attention.

This paper addresses that gap by examining how Gandhian principles operate not primarily as abstract ideology but as embedded practice in the everyday lives of Narayan's protagonists — in choices about education, consumption, family, and spiritual seeking. The central argument is that Narayan's protagonists negotiate



Gandhian principles in ways that are partial, selective, and frequently contradictory, and that this negotiation constitutes a philosophically significant exploration of ethical existence.

II. Objectives of the study

The study is guided by the following primary objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the Gandhian principles that inform the representation of everyday life in R.K. Narayan's selected novels.
2. To examine how Narayan's protagonists negotiate Gandhian ideals in their quotidian practices — including education, consumption, non-violence, and spiritual pursuit.
3. To explore the tensions and contradictions in Narayan's representation of Gandhian everyday life, particularly the persistent gap between ideal and actuality.
4. To investigate the relationship between Narayan's fictional representation and the broader social and political transformations of modern India.
5. To situate Narayan's engagement with Gandhian thought within the larger context of Indian English literature and postcolonial discourse.

III. Scope of the Study

The scope of the present study is deliberately focused and bounded. It concentrates on eight novels by R.K. Narayan that span his literary career, selected to represent both the range of his Gandhian engagement and the development of his artistic vision over time:

- Swami and Friends (1935)
- The Bachelor of Arts (1937)
- The English Teacher (1945)
- Waiting for the Mahatma (1955)
- The Guide (1958)
- The Vendor of Sweets (1967)
- A Tiger for Malgudi (1983)
- The World of Nagaraj (1990)

The study does not claim to cover Narayan's complete corpus, which includes numerous short story collections, travel writings, and memoirs. It is similarly focused on Gandhian philosophy as the primary analytical lens, rather than offering a comprehensive survey of all philosophical dimensions present in Narayan's fiction. The analysis is grounded in Narayan's texts as available in English translation and does not engage with Tamil-language criticism or archival materials. These deliberate boundaries allow for sustained close reading of each selected text within a coherent comparative framework. Future research may expand the scope to include

Narayan's short fiction, non-fictional writings, or a broader comparative study involving other Indian English novelists of the period.



IV. Major Themes

The analysis of the selected novels reveals five major thematic dimensions along which Gandhian principles are negotiated in Narayan's fiction:

Critique of Colonial Education

Gandhi's critique of colonial education — his argument that the British system produced individuals alienated from their own culture and incapable of genuine self-rule — appears as one of the most sustained themes across Narayan's corpus. From Swaminathan's unhappy experience at Albert Mission School in *Swami and Friends* to Krishnan's explicit rejection of English education in *The English Teacher*, Narayan consistently registers the alienation and cultural displacement that Gandhi identified as the primary effects of colonial schooling. Krishnan's characterisation of his pedagogical role as disseminating 'literary garbage from a different culture,' and his eventual resignation in favour of mother-tongue instruction, constitute the most direct fictional articulation of Gandhian educational philosophy in the corpus.

Consumption, Simplicity, and Swadeshi

Gandhi's philosophy of radical simplicity — embodied in his advocacy for khadi, the charkha, and the rejection of industrial consumer goods — finds its most detailed fictional representation in *The Vendor of Sweets*. Jagan's daily spinning, his natural therapy, his vegetarian diet, and the indigenous production of his sweet shop all embody the swadeshi ideal. Yet Narayan complicates this portrait with characteristic irony: Jagan simultaneously accumulates black money, revealing the difficulty of maintaining Gandhian economic ethics in the face of modern material pressures. The foreign cap bonfire in *Swami and Friends* represents swadeshi consciousness entering the world of childhood with comic literalness.

Ahimsa: Non-Violence as Daily Discipline

For Gandhi, Ahimsa — non-violence — extended far beyond the renunciation of physical harm to encompass non-violence in thought, word, and domestic relationship. Narayan explores this expansive understanding through the marital relationship of Krishnan and Susila in *The English Teacher*, where a practice of mutual attentiveness and non-coercive communication embodies Ahimsa in its most intimate form. *Waiting for the Mahatma* examines non-violence as political practice, tracing Sriram's gradual and impure deepening of commitment. *The Guide* explores the psychic violence of manipulation and deception, asking whether authentic Ahimsa can coexist with the sustained self-deception that characterises Raju's life.

Truth-Seeking and Self-Realisation

Gandhi's framing of his autobiography as 'experiments with truth' — implying that ethical life is an ongoing practical inquiry rather than the application of pre-given rules — provides a framework for understanding several of Narayan's most memorable protagonists. Krishnan in *The English Teacher*, Raju in *The Guide*, and Nagaraj in *The World of Nagaraj* are all engaged, in varying degrees of self-awareness, in experiments with truth. Narayan's representation consistently emphasises the ambiguity and difficulty of spiritual experience, resisting easy resolution. The question of whether Raju's final fasting represents authentic Satyagraha or continued self-promotion —



which the novel deliberately refuses to answer — encapsulates the complexity of this theme.

Swaraj: Tradition, Modernity, and Self-Rule

Gandhi's concept of Swaraj — self-rule, operating simultaneously as political independence, moral self-governance, and cultural identity — organises the recurring negotiation between tradition and modernity that runs through Narayan's fiction. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran's eventual acceptance of an arranged marriage represents a form of swaraj as conscious self-subordination to social obligation. *The Vendor of Sweets* frames the conflict between Jagan and his Americanised son Mali as an allegory of competing visions of Indian modernity. *A Tiger for Malgudi* extends the theme of swaraj to the non-human realm through the spiritual transformation of the tiger Raja under a holy man's guidance.

V. Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, text-based methodology grounded in close reading, informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on Gandhian philosophy, Indian intellectual traditions, and postcolonial theory. The methodological design reflects the conviction that literary texts yield their richest meanings through sustained attention to language, structure, and the particularity of represented experience, rather than through the imposition of external frameworks that reduce texts to illustrations of pre-given arguments.

Close Reading as Primary Method

Close reading constitutes the primary analytical method of this study. Each selected novel is read carefully and in its entirety, with sustained attention to the representation of quotidian practices — what characters eat, wear, and say; how they conduct their relationships; what choices they make in moments of conflict; what they pursue in moments of spiritual seeking. This attention to the details of everyday life reflects the conviction, shared with Gandhian philosophy itself, that ethical significance inheres in ordinary practice rather than grand gesture. The close readings are comparative and cumulative: patterns identified in one novel are tested against and refined by attention to others, allowing for the identification of both recurring concerns and significant variations.

Theoretical Framework

The close readings are informed by a multi-layered theoretical framework. From Gandhian philosophy, the study draws on the core concepts of Satyagraha, Ahimsa, Swaraj, Sarva Dharma Sambhava, swadeshi, and the principle of 'experiments with truth,' as articulated primarily in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), *Young India*, and Gandhi's *Autobiography*. These concepts are treated not as rigid analytical categories but as heuristic resources that illuminate dimensions of the texts that might otherwise remain obscure.

Indian philosophical traditions — particularly the concepts of Karma, Dharma, and Moksha as they inform Narayan's representation of spiritual seeking and ethical obligation — supplement the Gandhian framework. Postcolonial theory, drawing



primarily on the work of Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, provides analytical resources for understanding the complexity of the tradition-modernity negotiation and the cultural politics of writing in English about Indian experience. The everyday life theory of Michel de Certeau, which understands ordinary practice as a site of ethical and political significance, provides a broader theoretical rationale for the study's focus on quotidian dimensions of Gandhian thought.

Selection of Primary Texts

The eight novels selected for analysis were chosen according to three criteria: representativeness of the full span of Narayan's career; significance in terms of existing critical attention and intrinsic literary interest; and relevance to the Gandhian themes under investigation. The selection deliberately includes both the most overt engagements with Gandhian thought (*Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Vendor of Sweets*) and novels in which Gandhian principles operate more obliquely (*The Bachelor of Arts*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, *The World of Nagaraj*), in order to demonstrate both the explicit and the implicit dimensions of Narayan's Gandhian engagement.

Secondary Sources and Contextual Research

The close readings are situated within relevant secondary scholarship, including existing critical studies of Narayan's fiction, scholarship on Gandhian philosophy and its reception, and relevant postcolonial and Indian literary criticism. Contextual research into the historical and intellectual milieu of Narayan's writing — including the Independence movement, the Gandhian ashram movement, and the debates about colonial education and economic self-reliance — informs the readings without displacing attention to the texts themselves. The study deliberately eschews biographical criticism as a primary approach, treating Narayan's fiction as a body of literary work rather than as autobiographical testimony, while acknowledging where biographical context illuminates textual choices.

VI. Analysis: Gandhian Principles In Quotidian Practice

The English Teacher: Domestic Ahimsa and Educational Swaraj

The English Teacher (1945) represents Narayan's most sustained direct engagement with Gandhian educational philosophy. Krishnan's opening disillusionment with his role — teaching English literature to students in a provincial college — mirrors Gandhi's diagnosis of colonial education as productive of alienation rather than genuine culture. His eventual resignation and embrace of an alternative pedagogy grounded in mother-tongue instruction represents the most explicit fictional endorsement of Gandhian educational reform in the corpus.

Alongside the educational critique, the novel explores Ahimsa in its domestic dimension. Krishnan's relationship with Susila — characterised by patient attentiveness, mutual accommodation, and the consistent subordination of self-assertion to mutual flourishing — embodies a practice of non-violence in the most intimate sphere. When Susila dies, Krishnan's subsequent spiritual experiments represent an extension of the Gandhian 'experiment with truth' into the metaphysical realm, conducted with the same empirical seriousness that Gandhi brought to his political experiments.



The Vendor of Sweets: Gandhian Ideal and Its Contradictions

Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* is Narayan's most explicitly Gandhian character and, simultaneously, the figure in whom the gap between Gandhian ideal and quotidian actuality is most sharply drawn. His daily practices — spinning the charkha, reciting the Gita, avoiding Western medicine, producing indigenous sweets — compose a portrait of Gandhian simplicity that is, on the surface, admirable. Yet Narayan's ironic gaze reveals the hollowness of Jagan's Gandhianism: his accumulation of black money represents a direct contradiction of Gandhian economic ethics, while his emotional remoteness from his son Mali represents a failure of Ahimsa in the domestic sphere.

The entry of Mali with his American wife and his scheme for a story-writing machine dramatises the conflict between Gandhian and consumerist visions of modernity in its starkest form. The story-writing machine — which would mechanise narrative, the most irreducibly human of cultural activities — stands as a symbol of the industrial civilisation Gandhi condemned. Jagan's response — not Gandhian resistance but flight to a forest grove — reveals the limits of a Gandhianism that is primarily performative rather than genuinely transformative.

The Guide: The Ambiguity of Spiritual Transformation

The Guide (1958) is Narayan's most structurally complex novel and his most philosophically challenging engagement with the Gandhian theme of truth-seeking. Raju's trajectory — from tourist guide to lover and manager of Rosie/Nalini to accidental holy man — raises the central question: can a man whose life has been characterised by manipulation, deception, and self-promotion genuinely undergo spiritual transformation? Is his final fasting an act of Satyagraha — a holding to truth at personal cost — or a final, most elaborate performance?

Narayan's narrative deliberately refuses to resolve this question. The novel's alternating structure — moving between Raju's present situation and his retrospective account of his past — creates an irony in which the reader is never certain whether the man narrating his past has genuinely transcended it. This irresolution is, I would argue, philosophically significant: it reflects Gandhi's own recognition that self-deception is among the most persistent obstacles to genuine self-realisation, and that the authenticity of spiritual transformation is rarely legible from the outside.

Waiting for the Mahatma: Non-Violence as Political and Personal Discipline

Waiting for the Mahatma examines Ahimsa in its most explicitly political dimension, through Sriram's involvement in the Quit India Movement. Sriram's initial motivation is frankly self-interested: his attraction to the Gandhian activist Bharati leads him into a political commitment he would not otherwise have sought. Narayan traces his gradual deepening of understanding — through arrest, imprisonment, and the sobering experience of Gandhi's assassination — with characteristic irony but also with genuine sympathy. Sriram's impure, experience-driven deepening of Gandhian commitment is more representative of how people actually come to ethical seriousness than the idealised portraits of Gandhian fiction sometimes offer.

Gandhi himself appears in the novel as a small, intensely practical, patient man — his authority manifested not in rhetorical grandeur but in the daily discipline of ashram life.



This representation implicitly argues for the quotidian dimension of Ahimsa: non-violence is not a heroic achievement but a daily practice, accumulated through innumerable small choices. It is this understanding of Ahimsa as discipline rather than revelation that runs through Narayan's representation of the Gandhian everyday.

VII. Tensions and Contradictions

Narayan's most philosophically significant contribution to the representation of Gandhian everyday life is his persistent attention to the gap between Gandhian ideals and the practical realities of ordinary existence. This gap manifests consistently across the corpus, in several dimensions:

- **Economic practice:** Jagan's black money coexists with his visible Gandhian simplicity, revealing the difficulty of maintaining Gandhian economic ethics in a modern commercial society.
- **Spiritual seeking:** Krishnan's spiritual experiments in *The English Teacher* lead not to permanent transcendence but to a return to ordinary life and community service.
- **Non-violence:** The persistence of conflict, manipulation, and psychic harm in Narayan's fictional world complicates the ideal of comprehensive Ahimsa.
- **Language and cultural identity:** Narayan's own practice of writing in English while critiquing colonial education represents an autobiographical version of the tension he depicts in his protagonists.

These tensions are not presented judgmentally but descriptively: Narayan represents the gap between ideal and actuality as a condition of human existence rather than a moral failure to be condemned. This perspective reflects his understanding that Gandhian principles constitute resources for ethical navigation rather than algorithms that guarantee correct behaviour — and that the experiment with truth, as Gandhi himself acknowledged, is an ongoing process, never a completed achievement.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has argued that R.K. Narayan's engagement with Gandhian thought is more sustained, complex, and central to his artistic vision than existing scholarship has recognised. Through his attention to the quotidian practices of his protagonists, Narayan offers a nuanced exploration of the possibilities and limitations of Gandhian philosophy as a guide for everyday life in modern India — what might be called a 'quotidian Gandhi': an image of the Mahatma's principles as they are actually negotiated in the details of ordinary existence rather than as they are proclaimed in political manifestos.

His protagonists engage with Gandhian principles partially, selectively, and contradictorily — and Narayan's representation of this engagement is characterised by compassionate irony rather than moral judgment. The gap between ideal and actuality is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be inhabited; the experiment with truth is not a destination but an ongoing discipline. These convictions, rendered with



extraordinary subtlety and narrative art, give Narayan's fiction its distinctive philosophical depth and its continued relevance to contemporary understandings of Gandhi's legacy and the challenges of ethical existence.

In an era of renewed engagement with Gandhian thought and its relevance to ecological crisis, cultural homogenisation, and political violence, Narayan's fictional world offers resources for reflection that extend well beyond the study of Indian English literature. His Malgudi reminds us that philosophy, to be meaningful, must be livable — and that the pursuit of truth is enacted, always imperfectly, in the details of daily life.

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