

R.K. NARAYAN “AS A NOVELIST OF COMMON PEOPLE AND AN A CUTE OBSERVER OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE ORDINARY USING SIMPLE PROSE STYLE”: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly introduces the readers to Indo-Anglian literature making them understand how Indian writing in English has a solid tradition behind it and projects R.K. Narayan not only as one of the most outstanding of the Indian authors writing in English but also the most artistic of the Indian writers standing for the immense flexibility and adaptability of English. It neatly examines how Narayan at his best is a meticulous recorder of the ironies of human life and an acute observer of the possibilities of the ordinary, using simple prose style of narrations with a focus on various themes and ideas from the point of human dimension.

Key words: Cute observer

The term ‘Indo-Anglian Literature’ is used to denote original literary creation in the English language by Indian authors. It is a part of truly Indian fiction and not a tenuous extension of English fiction. Indian writing in English has a solid tradition behind it, beginning with the great Bengali reformer and philosopher, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj Movement. Indo-Anglian literature continued to grow and flourish for attaining higher peaks of excellence through a significant number of eminent Indians like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, the three foremost Indian writers in English who contributed a lot to the growth of fiction in English. Writers like K.Nagarajan, Bhabani Bhattcharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai followed

suit by contributing to the rich thought and technique of the form so as to make Indian novel in English secure a place of prestige in Indo-Anglian literature.

R.K. Narayan, generally acknowledged as one of the most outstanding of the Indian authors writing in English, is the most artistic of the Indian writers. With his sole aim being to give aesthetic satisfaction and not to use his art as a medium of propaganda or to serve some social purpose as is the case with Mulk Raj Anand. Emerging as a notable writer in the 1930s, R.K. Narayan has what Britta Olinder has called “a singular power of joining his fresh and humorous view of the ordinary world with the deeper meaning and larger perspectives he finds in the mythical treasures of his own religion”. (p.22)

Such a great writer was born at the beginning of the 20th century, on October 10, 1906 at Chennapatnam near Mysore in Southern Indian and passed away on May 13, 2001. Since Narayan's early age was spent in loneliness, he was a shy and sensitive boy. He studied at his father's school and maintained a diligent dislike for studies. The qualifier to the graduate course in Arts proved his nemesis, Narayan failed. He resolved to write for his living and write in English. Reporting for defunct journals, freelancing here and there and similar 'literary' odd jobs catered more to the spirits than pockets. He kept on writing and submitting. Having spent one full year at home reading and writing, he began his literary career writing under the influence of events in his immediate soundings. By profession, he was a teacher of English language and literature, but after working as a teacher only for five days, he left his profession forever and dedicated himself to literary activities. He has to his credit publication of such works as 1. **Swami and Friends** (1930), 2. **The English Teacher** (1945) 3. **Mr. Sampath** (1949), 4. **The Financial Expert** (1952), 5. **Waiting for the Mahatma** (1955), 6. **The Lawley Road** (1956), 7. **The Guide** (1958), 8. **The Man-Eater of Malgudi**, (1962), 9. **The Vendor of Sweets**, (1967), 10. **A Horse and Two Goats** (1970), 11. **The World of Nagaraj** (1990) and many short stories and essays.

Narayan chose Malgudi, an imaginary town for all his novels and short stories. It is essentially Indian in spirit and made a living presence in his works. 'Malgudi' is a microcosm of the Indian society and he presented his vision of life through this

imaginary place, Malgudi. He is, no doubt, a thorough Indian writing about Indian men, women, manners, culture, traditions, religious practices, superstitions and many other aspects of the Hindu society, although the medium he chose for his works in English and he has presented his vision of life through portrayal of this imaginary town Malgudi. As Nandan in his **The Life of R.K. Narayan** says",

"He weaved a world exiting nowhere, but striking a chord of perfect reality with readers across the English reading peoples". (p.43)

John Updike, a famous American novelist gives an excellent pen-portrait of the writer in his elegant and inclusive review of Narayan's Autobiography. He says, "Madrssa, when he was raised and Mysore, where he came to live, spontaneously forterred a fictional city" (27). Like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan too managed to remain a writer adopting writing as a career, a means to earn his livelihood. He has "no axes of any kind; he is that rare thing in India today a man of letters pure and simple" (Iyengar, 358) Though the credit of bringing a name and fame to Indo-Anglian fiction goes first to the trio of writers - Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, the two others are committed writers while Narayan, on the other hand continues to remain uncommitted till the end. While M.R. Anand is an ardent believer in the doctrine of social revolution and socialistic pattern of society, and Raja Rao is a committed novelist writing with a sense of direct involvement in the national struggle sweeping through the villages of

Southern India, R.K. Narayan is said to be away from addressing himself directly, openly and centrally in his novels to any political, social or economic problem of the age. He seems to believe in “the principle of Art for the sake of Art”, says Agnihotri (p.83)

Narayan’s novels may be classified into such four categories as 1. Early novels 2. Domestic novels, 3. Novels dealing with Mammon-worshippers and 4. Political novels. In all he has written about 10 novels and about 151 short stories. In almost all his works, he is found to be a pure artist remaining unruffled by political movements and ‘isms’. One can visualize neither Anand’s propaganda nor Bhabani Bhattacharya’s vigour in him. Like Manohar Malgonkar, he does not disparage the Indian politicians nor does he believe in exalting the importance of Indian spiritual heritage like Raja Rao. He is a class in himself. He is, no doubt, a writer of average emotions, springing surprises and even giving mild shocks, but never indulges in the morbid aspects of life. He is a staunch believer in domestic harmony and peaceful human relationships.

The basic theme of his novels is the place of man in this universe and his predicament. Narayan himself said once:

“The mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul and its resolution are the necessary ingredients in fiction”. (p.12)

Narayan is of the opinion that life is illogical and man is always trying to translate his fantasies into reality. So, through the reversal

of fortune, Narayan completes the story of man’s rise and fall and thus presents a total view of human life. He may be described as a novelist of the middle class. His novels present members of the Indian middle class as engaged in a struggle ‘to extricate themselves from the automation of the past’. Most of Narayan’s characters belong to middle class, especially to the lower middle classes of South India. Chandran belongs to middle-class family. Editor Srinivas also is bothered with the idea of earning his bread and butter. Mr. Sampath’s whole life is centred round the problem of making money and Raju, the guide, is not always beyond monetary cares. These human beings are the usual sort of human beings, prudish, cunning and prosaic.

No doubt, Narayan is a novelist of common people and common situations. His plots are built of materials and incidents that are neither extraordinary nor heroic. The tone of his novels is quiet and subdued. He selects day-to-day incidents that happen to almost everyone of us one time or another. His heroes are average human beings and they do not possess extraordinary capacities, but through some accidents attain greatness very soon to return to their original state. If one takes the life of a school boy like Swami, one finds nothing extraordinary or strange in his life. Similarly, Mr. Sampath, Chandran, Raju, Rosie, Savitri and others live, love and suffer in a maze of incidents which are just common place.

R.K.Narayan is said to have explored and highlighted the malfunction of the social system without prejudice. Iain Findayson observes:

“Anyone familiar with the area of India known to Narayan and his readers as Malgudi will recognize it as a sort of Swiftian flying island, landing and folding itself into the landscape of the Chelsea Hotel, New York, as into Mysore and Madras. This modestly memorable memoir ranks with the best of Waugh and Wodehouse’ (p.36)

For Narayan, storytelling is deeply concerned with establishing a sense of community of people completely involved in each other. He “writes with complete objectivity”, with a strange mixture of humour and irony and an underlying sense of beauty and sadness”. (Walsh, 133)

Narayan excels as “an artful delineator of character”. He says, “my focus is all on character. If his personality comes alive, the rest is easy one”. He has created a richly varied portrait gallery over the years of students, teachers, parents, grandparents, half-hearted dreamers, journalists, artists, financiers, film-makers eccentrics, cranks, sanyasis and women-pious, suffering coquettish and seductive. It is a veritable world of men and women, both real and exotic, brought to life with uncommon dexterity. **Swami and Friends** chronicles and extroverted school boy’s rebellion against his missionary upbringing. It is a character – novel dealing with the life of Swaminathan at school. It is in fact, a novelette and makes an enjoyable reading. **The Bachelor of Arts** is another novel dealing with college life. If **Swami and Friends** presents the school days of Swaminathan, **The Bachelor of Arts** this to capture the feelings of Chandran, a young

man of twenty one and **The English Teacher** similarly portrays the life and elaborates the propensities of a teacher. In the words of H.E. Bates, “Mr. Narayan’s rendering of human relationships has perfection of phrasing and a depth of understanding that makes Chandran’s life very real” (p.26). Graham Greene gets a new glimpse into life through this **The Bachelor of Arts** and writes:

“It was Mr. Narayan with his **Swami and Friends** who first brought India in the sense of the Indian population and the Indian way of life, alive to me and in **The Bachelor of Arts**, he continues to fill in his picture of Malgudi, a small town in Mysore. Narayan has created wonderfully memorable characters in **The Bachelor of Arts**” (47)

Narayan’s fiction portrays middle-class characters with the everyday reality of Indian life. **Mr. Sampath**, published in the United States as **The Printer of Malgudi** does chronicle a village printer’s unsuccessful attempt to become a film producer. **Swami and Friends**, **Bachelor of Arts** and **The English Teacher** are a trilogy of Malgudi-on-Sarayu. **The Dark Room** is a lament on the disharmony of domestic life dealing with the life of the hero namely Ramani, a successful branch manager of an Insurance Company, Whereas **The Financial Expert** is a delightful novel for the gentle irony used to bring out the rise and fall of Margayya, the financial wizard.

In **Waiting for the Mahatma**, Narayan uses as background the Indian Freedom Movement from which he, like so many Indian writers of the time, had derived the

basic nationalism – that sense of place and time and some idea of who you are – so necessary to the writing of realist fiction. **The Guide** is Narayan’s most popular and accomplished novel telling the tale of Raju, a former convict mistaken for a holy man upon his arrival in Malgudi. In **The Vendor of Sweets**, a merchant is portrayed as one who abandons his professions and his family concerns for a life of tranquility and meditation. In **Mr. Sampath**, Sampath is projected as “a great living character in the annals of Indo-Anglian fiction. He spoke in Hindi and could easily be mistaken for a North Indian with fur-cap and the scarf hung another with perfect equanimity. He cheats some, obliges others and is always optimistic. The story of Mr. Sampath has been written with delicacy and care, while **The Painter of Signs** is a story of a young painter of signboards, a bachelor who glorifies in his old-fashioned Independence. **The Men-Eater of Malgudi** is the story not of a tiger but of a cruel and ruthless taxidermist named Vasu, a heartless creature who has no regard for gratitude or obligations. The novel may be cited as remarkably successful from the point of view of characterization.

While Mulk Raj Anand is described as a novelist of the working class, R.K. Narayan may be described as a novelist of the middle class. The characters he chose for his novels are numbers of the middle class. He always creates convincing situations to suit his characters that normally live about and move in the limited regions of Malgudi. His memories of Malgudi never fail the readers to remind of Thomas Hardy’s ‘Wessex’, William Faulkner’s ‘Yokhapatwpha’ or Patrick White’s

‘Sarasaparitla’. He is more concerned with the character analysis of men and women.

“Character is the soul of tragedy” said Aristotle long ago and this is applicable to the fiction of Narayan who achieves greatness in the field of characterization by recognizing his range and working with it. The middle class society is a major social group in India and Narayan succeeds in bringing out a clear cross section of this society. As Leo Lowenthal points out, the artist reacts to the society in a particular manner:

“Man is born, strives, loves, suffers and dies in any society, but it is the portrayal of how he reacts to these common human experiences that matters. Since they almost in variables have a social nexus. Precisely because literature presents the whole man in depth, the artist tends to justify or defy society rather than be its passive chronicler” (p.3)

A study of Narayan’s novels shows that he is concerned with a number of themes and ideas. Human relation is the major theme of his novels. “The family is the in mediate contact in which his sensibility operates and his novels are remarkable for the subtle and conviction with which family relationships are treated – that of a son and parents and brother and brother in **The Bachelor of Arts** of husband and wife and father and daughter in **The English Teacher**, of father and son in **The Financial Expert** and of grandmother and grandson in **Waiting for the Mahatma**” (Walsh, 71) Narayan in **The Dark Room** and **The Guide** talks about the marital disharmony and the frustration caused in the married life.

The greatest point about Narayan's writing is its use of language. His writing is too simple and too readable, requiring no effort to the part of the reader. His observation and felicity with words get revealed in the following passage:

"It was April. The summer sun shone like a ruthless lamp – and all the water in the well evaporated and the road dust became bleached and weightless and flew about like flour spraying off the grinding wheels long solitary walks remained a lifelong passion; the world relocated his every pore. When the monsoon broke out, one could watch dark mountainous clouds mustering, edged with lightning; these would develop awesome pyrotechnics. In June, drizzle and sunshine alternating, leaving gold mohur, flame of the forest, and jacaranda in bloom along the avenues. In July and August the never-ending downpour, grey leaden skies, and damp air blowing" (My Days)

Narayan stands for the immense flexibility and adaptability of English. He uses the language of the Bible, Shakespeare and the American Constitution to an amazing effect. His narrative technique is straightforward and quite natural. Unlike Raja Rao, he writes in a simple and lucid style. He prefers to use only easy and natural expression even in complex or intricate situations. The simplicity employed in his novels has made a tremendous impact on the minds of the readers both at home and abroad. 'Readability' is the acid test for a novelist Narayan's novels are eminently readable and his admirers find his simple style, gentle

irony and wit very attractive. Like Sudhin Ghose, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and other Indian English novelists, Narayan too employs deftly the stylistic device of using myths. He has imparted a definite sustained mythical structure to his famous novel, **The Man Eater of Malgudi**. In this context, S. Krishnam remarks:

"If Narayan's narrative powers owe something to his familiarity with traditional Indian story-telling, the universal significance he sees in many of the Indian myths gives strength and substance to his plots and characters. Narayan's own exercise of myth making, namely the portrait of Gandhi in **Waiting for the Mahatma**, makes a special appeal to his American audience" (p.19)

Narayan's simple prose style of narrations holds up a mirror to the simple, occasionally ambitious and the relaxed way of living of the Malgudians. Commenting on his style, Uma Parameswaran observes:

"His prose is clear and correct but lacks poetry. It is the prose of the plains, not the prose of the gushing Ganga of the Himalayas as found in Mulk Raj Anand or Raja Rao. It is the prose of the southern plains in April when the rivers are streamless. Standing still in the torrid blaze of the tropical sun, appreciated by the passerby not so much for what they contain as for what they represent, not much for their meager beauty but the sheer fact that they are there, still surviving under the summer sun. The same metaphor might be applied to Narayan's early work in general. It is appreciated for

the sheer fact of its existence at a time and place when the literary cline was dry and barren” (24)

Narayan is a writer, pure and simple. He has no ambition or pretensions to be dubbed as a crusader or an idealist. In the words of Professor K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, Narayan is “a master of comedy who is not unaware of the tragedy of the human situation, he is neither an intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes nor their fanatic defender, he is on the whole, content to snap Malgudi life’s little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance and tragic-comedies of mischance and misdirection” (p.4). Shashi Tharoor asserts, “Narayan at his best is consummate teller of timeless tales, a meticulous recorder of the ironies of human life, an acute observer of the possibilities of the ordinary” (p.19)

To conclude, it may be said that Narayan’s place among the novelists of India is supreme and he may be said to be one of the best novelists that India has produced. He is, no

doubt, a novelist of common people and common situations.

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No great person survived without great dreams.

~ Robin Sharma