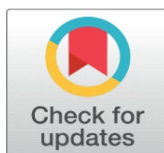


CONTRIBUTION OF R.K. NARAYAN IN THE FIELD OF LITERATURE AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan regarded as one of the “Big three” among the Indian novelists in English has been admired for his remarkable gift for telling stories, portraying memorable people of small oddities and eccentricities, and for his humour. To tell a story engagingly is no mean gift for a novelist. Narayan’s fiction rarely addresses political issues or high philosophy. He writes with grace and humor, about a fictional town Malgudi and its inhabitants; and their little lives. Narayan is a classic teller of tales; an enduring appeal springs from his canvas where common men and women of all times and places are joined in their commonalty.

Keywords: Indian Epics, Literature, Malgudi Days, ‘A Man of Letter’, Warmth and Vibrancy

1. INTRODUCTION

Narayan, over several productive decades, has written eleven novels, several collections of stories, a memoir, and new versions of several classic Indian epics. He is, without question, what used to be called “a man of letters.” The recipient of many awards for his writing—both individual prizes for specific works and awards acknowledging the merit of his entire body of work—Narayan is considered one of India’s most distinguished authors. Although approaching eighty, he continues to write, still adding to his monumental picture of Indian life during the twentieth century.

In some respects, Narayan might be compared to William Faulkner, Honoré de Balzac, or to other writers who carried in their imagination the vast landscape of an entire culture, and who re-created that culture in volume after volume. Many of Narayan’s stories possess a folktale quality, a sense of collective memory being shared with the reader much as an elderly relative might tell old stories to children around a fire at night—or as a visitor might regale a friend against his will with story after story. Most of the brief tales in *Malgudi Days* are remembered from previous times, ranging from not long ago to decades earlier. The result is a patchwork-quilt effect, with splashes of color and subtle vignettes working together to create an often dazzling tapestry of real and imagined life. Sometimes the stories may not be strictly true. Occasionally, they are blatant tall tales, with little pretense at veracity. The truth inherent in these tales, however, goes beyond the mere plausibility of the facts of the narrative. The tiger in “The Tiger’s Claw” may or may not have behaved

as the author says, but it does not really matter. The reader does not know if the story is true, but it might be, especially if one is willing to suspend disbelief and enjoy the tale on its own merits.

One cannot bring the prejudices of modern literary criticism to the tales of Narayan. In a literary world in which stories of psychological violence and formal experimentation prevail, Narayan's little stories seem naïve and simple. Here, however, is where their strength may lie. They do not pretend to be anything other than what they are. In their clean prose and simple attitudes, they may well achieve a power and a truth that many more fashionable works miss.

2. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Narayan was born in Mysore, India, in 1906. His father was an administrator and headmaster at several government schools and instilled in Narayan a love of literature. He did not have much academic success, however, having difficulty with his college entrance exam in English. In 1926, he enrolled in the B.A. program in English in Maharaja College, Mysore, after which he embarked on a short-lived teaching career. Finding the academic life was not for him, Narayan turned to writing. After being turned down by several publishers, Narayan gave the manuscript of his first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), to a friend and gave him permission to destroy it. The friend showed the novel to Graham Greene, who was impressed and found a publisher for the book. Narayan's writing career was born and the prolific writer went on to publish novels, several volumes of short stories, collections of essays, and his memoirs, entitled *My Days* (1974).

Narayan's Success as Writer:

Narayan's next novel, *The English Teacher* was published in 1945, and since then novels had flowed from his pen in quick succession, at the rate of one book every two years. *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947), *Mr. Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *Lawley Road* (1956), *The Guide* (1958), *Next Sunday*, a collection of sketches and essays (1960), *My Dateless Diary* (1960), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1962), *Gods, Demons and Other Stories* (1965), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *A Horse and Two Goats* (1970), A version of the Ramayana based on the Tamil poet Kamban was published in 1973 and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) completes the list of his works.

Narayan had an extensive writing career marked with a rich literary output:

Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Iyer Narayanaswamy stood shortened to R.K. Narayan, on Graham Greene's advice. Narayan lived till ninety-five, writing for more than fifty years, and publishing till he was eighty seven. He wrote fifteen novels, five volumes of short stories, a number of travelogues and collection of non-fiction, English translation of Indian epics, and the memoirs "My Days". Yet it is neither the copiousness of output, nor currency of content or the lack of either that gives Narayan his place among the finest story-tellers of modern English.

Narayan commanded a wide readership across the English reading people:

Narayan weaved a world existing nowhere, but striking a chord of perfect reality with readers across the English reading peoples. His books appeal in a quiet, reassuring way and have remained popular over many decades. His writing is also part of literature coursework in some American universities. Narayan evokes a unique diction of unusual freshness and rare ingenuity with the English literary idiom.

He wrote about people in a small town in South India: small people, big talk, and small doings:

"He wrote about people in a small town in South India: small people, big talk, and small doings". That was where he began; that was where he was fifty years later. To some extent that reflected Narayan's own life. He never moved far from his origins. When I met him in London in 1961—he had been traveling, and was about to go back to India he told me he needed to be back home, to do his walks (with an umbrella for the sun) and to be among his characters.

He truly possessed his world. It was complete and always there, waiting for him; and it was far enough away from the center of things for outside disturbances to die down before they could get to it. Even the independence movement, in the heated 1930s and 1940s, was far away, and the British presence was marked mainly by the names of buildings and places.

This was an India that appeared to mock the vainglorious and went on in its own way. Dynasties rose and fell. Palaces and mansions appeared and disappeared. The entire country went down under the fire and sword of the invader, and was washed clean when Sarayu [the local river] overflowed its bounds. But it always had its rebirth and growth. In this view (from one of the more mystical of Narayan's books) the fire and sword of defeat are like abstractions. There is no true suffering, and rebirth is almost magical.

The characteristics of Narayan's small people:

These small people of Narayan's books, earning petty sums from petty jobs, and comforted and ruled by ritual, seem oddly insulated from history. They seem to have been breathed into being; and on examination they don't appear to have an ancestry. They have only a father and perhaps a grandfather; they cannot reach back further into the past. They go to

ancient temples; but they do not have the confidence of those ancient builders; they themselves can build nothing that will last. But the land is sacred, and it has a past.

Narayan's world is not, after all, as rooted and complete as it appears. His small people dream simply of what they think has gone before, but they are without personal ancestry; there is a great blank in their past. Their lives are small, as they have to be: this smallness is what has been allowed to come up in the ruins, with the simple new structures of British colonial order (school, road, bank, courts).

In Narayan's books, when the history is known, there is less the life of a wise and enduring Hindu India than a celebration of the redeeming British peace. So in India the borrowed form of the English or European novel, even when it has learned to deal well with the externals of things, can sometimes miss their terrible essence."

But the greatest point about Narayan's writing is its use of language:

- ❖ But the greatest point about Narayan's writing is its use of language. His talent goes beyond mere aptitude with words or a maverick Malgudi. Narayan stands for the immense flexibility, adaptability and élan of English; he uses the language of Bible, Shakespeare and American Constitution to an amazing effect while dealing in subjects vastly removed.
- ❖ His creatures 'squat on the floor for meals, wear dhoti with a coat, read the Ramayana, regard mothers as sacred, rebel against fathers, marry for love over money, and aspire for eternal life'. The author writes all this without a single footnote, without any discernible twang of the foreign, with a sense of disarming familiarity.
- ❖ Narayan represents the synthesis that is English, a language evolving through the synergy of civilizations, known and unknown; a language in continual quest. "Narayan wrote in English about Indian life. This is actually a difficult thing to do, and Narayan solved the problems by appearing to ignore them. He wrote lightly, directly, with little social explanation. His English was so personal and easy, so without English social associations, that there was no feeling of oddity; he always appeared to be writing from within his culture."

3. MAJOR WORKS

Narayan's fiction inhabits the world of everyday events and common people in a fictional place called Malgudi. He incorporates traditional Hindu mythology and legends in stories of modern events. He tells stories of ordinary people who rely on Hindu principles to guide them through the ethical dilemmas and problems of modern life. Narayan's fiction avoids being overtly political or ideological. His early novels focus on the conflict between Indian and Western culture. *Swami and Friends* chronicles an extroverted schoolboy's rebellion against his missionary upbringing. *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) depicts an idealistic college student who attacks the bourgeois order but eventually reconciles himself to an obedient, lawful existence.

Malgudi is a land of fantasy:

Malgudi is the setting of nearly all of Narayan's work. It is described as being somewhere in southern India. Malgudi has some elements of Hardy's Wessex and perhaps can be pinned on a map as exactly Wodehouse's Blandings has recently been done. But Malgudi is different from either. Its moorings in geography and also history—seem never an issue; Narayan's space-time bubble bounces in absolute ether. Malgudi is a land of fantasy, not as in a dream, coloured and brilliant; but the reverie of relaxed awakening, a contemplation of commonness.

Life there is reduced, or elevated, to the lowest common denominator of living, which remains the same in nearly all places and times. Small men, smaller means, touched at times by the cares of a larger world, but unruffled, still moving on. The characters yearn for fame and money and virtue and those "real" things, but their longings stand tempered by a subtle sense of limitation, almost comic.

(a). Malgudi Days

Malgudi Days is a collection of short stories by R.K.Naryan published in 1943 by Indian Thought Publications.

The book was republished outside India in 1982 by Penguin Classics. The book includes 32 stories, all set in the fictional town of Malgudi, located in South India. Each of the stories portrays a facet of life in Malgudi. The New York Times described the virtue of the book as "everyone in the book seems to have a capacity for responding to the quality of his particular hour. It's an art we need to study and revive."

In 1986, a few of the stories in the book were included in the Malgudi Days television series and directed by actor and director, Shankar Nag.

In 2004, the project was revived with film-maker Kavitha Lankesh replacing the late Shankar Nag as director. The new series was telecast from April 26, 2006 on Doordarshan.

In 2014, Google commemorated Narayan's 108th birthday by featuring a Google Doodle showing him behind a copy of **Malgudi Days**.

Chapters of Malgudi Days

- ❖ **"An Astrologer's Day"**: A short story about an astrologer who knows nothing about stars or astrology. He never wanted to be an astrologer but his poverty made him so. With more of matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork he retorted such verdicts that astonished and pleased people. One day, he meets his rival whom he thought that he had killed long ago. They were now face to face. With the help of his disguise of an astrologer he fooled his rival and has a hair-breadth escape.
- ❖ **"The Missing Mail"**: A story about Thannappa, a good hearted postman who shared a good relationship with all the people whom he used to handle their letter especially with Ramanujam, a senior clerk in the Revenue Department Office. He doesn't deliver a letter to Ramanujam about the death of his relative in order to prevent it from serving as an obstacle in the marriage ceremony of Ramanujam's daughter that was finally going to be happening after many ups and downs.
- ❖ **"The Doctor's Word"**: A story about Dr Raman, a doctor who believes good words can't save lives. He is very staunch about that. Suddenly his best friend falls terribly ill and the situation goes out of his hand. Now he is betwixt very badly. He finally tells good words to save his friend's life even though he knew there was no ray of hope for his survival and at the end doctor's friend survives miraculously that still remains a great mystery even for the doctor himself.
- ❖ **"Gateman's Gift"**: A story about Govind Singh who throughout his life served as a gatekeeper and security guard, after retiring indulged himself in the hobby of making miniature of sawdust and clay.
- ❖ **"The Blind Dog"**: A story about a blind beggar who catches a dog to guide him through the streets. And even after torturing the dog so much the dog returns to him after running away.
- ❖ **"The Tiger's Claw"**: A story about The Talkative Man, a recurring character in several short stories, and his fight with a tiger.
- ❖ **"Iswaran"**: A story about a boy named Iswaran who failed his intermediate exams ten times, and when he finally passes it, in happiness, he gets drowned in the river Sarayu.
- ❖ **"Such Perfection"**: A story about a sculptor who becomes worshipful of his most recent statue.
- ❖ **"Father's Help"**: A story about Swami, a character from his first novel "Swami and Friends". In this story Swami falsely accuses his teacher Samuel. He is taught to behave properly and to speak the truth by his father.
- ❖ **"The Snake Song"**: A story about a musician narrating his experience why he had stopped playing the flute.
- ❖ **"Engine Trouble"**: A story about a poor man, who wins a road engine in a lottery, who gets into a big trouble as he is unable to make it to good use.
- ❖ **"Forty-Five A Month"**: A story about Daughter (Shanta) and her father (Venkat Rao), how the relationship between them and how he turned to realize that family feelings and joined together.
- ❖ Out of Business
- ❖ **"Attila"**: A story about a friendly dog who is given a fierce name in an attempt to scare off burglars, without much success.
- ❖ "The Axe"
- ❖ "Lawley Road"

A Story about how a misidentification of a statue can change a street name, Kabir Street to Lawley Road. During early times of independence, Chairman of malgudi municipality wanted to do grants. There was a statue of Sir Frederick Lawley in the Lawley Extension. he wanted to remove it as he thought that he was a cruel and ruthless tyrant. He suppressed the people. The statue was about twenty feet high. It stood firmly on a solid pedestal of molten lead. Tenders to remove it were invited which would cost fifty thousand which municipally could afford. So they decided to offer the statue to a talkative man, a correspondent for an upcountry newspaper for free but he has to remove it himself.

The man agreed to it and removed it and take it to his home. But later it was founded that there was a Frederick Lawley who was unkind but this Lawley was a kind person who helped people. when the public knew this, they picketed his house in Kabir Street. The chairman forced the talkative man to return it as it was a time of elections but he wanted him to pay him for his hard work of removing it. The municipally cannot afford it so it bought the talkative man's house and

the statue and made his house a public park and changed the street name to Lawley Road. With this, he also protected his seat

- "Trail of the Green Blazer"
- "The Martyr's Corner"
- "Wife's Holiday"
- "A Shadow"
- "A Willing Slave"
- "Leela's Friend"

(b). The Financial Expert

The Financial Expert is the story of a proud money lender, Margayya. The novel depicts the ups and downs of the life of a modern man in Indian society. This story tries to show the innermost truth of Indian life. Malgudi forms the setting of this novel. Walsh calls Margayya, the hero of the novel, Probably Narayan's greatest single comic creation." Margayya shows the 'Marg' or the way to others. The theme of the novel is lust for money, but Margayya is no monster of wickedness. R.K.Narayan has succeeded in humanizing him. Narayan showed that despite his lust for money, Margayya is a human being like us. This novel is a general satire on growing independence which has shaken the age old joint family system in India. Margayya and his brother are next door neighbours but they are not on speaking terms

R.K.Narayan is a sensitive writer and he feels that the sense of kinship is always strong despite apparent differences. Margayya and his brother are always ready to share each other's joys and sorrows. The functioning of various organizations like co-operative banks and financial organizations has also seen satirized. Narayan's Indianness is further seen in various other ways. He has a great regard for family ties and pieties of the home and the family. Human relationships, particularly domestic relationships, occupy a central place in his novels. If the accepted norms are violated, the order is disturbed; the order is restored, and normalcy established once again as a result of the influence of the family. This stress on the role of the family shows his Indianness. This is clearly seen in The Financial Expert and his other novels. Today anywhere in India we come across people like, Margayya, as many as possible, who always run after money. The tales from the Hindu mythology, the teachings of The Bhagavadgita, and the austere religious practices and beliefs their ordained add Indianness to the fictional art of R.K.Narayan. Margayya requests the priest, "I want to acquire wealth. Can you show me a way? I will do anything you suggest". This attitude of Margayya is a fine example of the human tendency of becoming desperate to realize one's ambitions, often overlooking the adverse effects in pursuing them. At last as Indian philosophy is considered, Narayan tries to reconstruct the often observed pattern in reality that material assets are of no use. If the basic integrity and sympathy are lost, if one's attitude is gaining riches is selfish and singular.

(c). The English Teacher:

The sudden death of Rajam was a stunning blow to Narayan. The prophecy of Rajam's family astrologer turned out to be right. She suddenly developed typhoid and died in 1939, just five, years after their marriage. Rajam's death badly disturbed Narayan. Her death was both a shattering and a rewarding experience. Passing through the dark valley of shadow of death, he emerged a fuller and a wise man.

He gained inner illumination that increased his knowledge of life and its mystery, which comes only through suffering. The personal loss which he suffered coloured many of his works. For six years after the terrible loss, Narayan did not write any single novel. It was a period of deep anguish and introspection. Narayan's life with Rajam is vividly described in The English Teacher, published in 1945

He preserved with great care and love, the gold band he had received from his wife at his death bed. During this period, he edited only a journal, The Indian Thought, and published three volumes of short stories—Malgudi Days (1941), Dodu and Other Stories (1943) and Cyclone and Other Stories 1944).

Psychic Explorations of Narayan following the death of his wife, Rajam:

It was some time before the earlier lightness returned to Narayan's writing. It eventually did, but became nuanced with heightened sensitivity and restraint. His wife's demise also opened certain psychic explorations for Narayan. For the next few years, Narayan battled with the fact of death. He periodically left Mysore for Madras where he met a lawyer who claimed to communicate with the dead through so called automatic writing. The lawyer transcribed messages from Rajam. So Narayan developed spiritual contact with his wife:

"We stood at the window, gazing on a slender, red streak over the eastern rim of the earth. A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death."

Thus ends *The English Teacher* (published in USA as "Grateful to Life and Death") in a description of the deceased wife "visiting" her husband from the great beyond. The book speaks to the readers as one of the finest odes to love, rather than an almanac of after-life.

The death of Narayan's wife Rajam and his autobiographical novel, *The English Teacher*:

In 1939, Narayan's wife Rajam passed away. Their only child Hema, a daughter, was three years old. This bereavement brought about a permanent change in his life. Narayan remained distressed for a long time, out of grief and concerns of single parenthood. His fourth novel, *The English Teacher* is a catharsis of these times, and Narayan has said, "More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction." The wife of the protagonist dies of typhoid. Her illness, the prognosis, the hopes, despair and death are painted with strokes of delicate detachment and infinite pain. The reader is touched by the narrative, a universal loss echoes.

Awards and Honors for Narayan:

Narayan received the 'Sahitya Akademy Award' for *The Guide* in 1960. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1964. The University of Leeds conferred on him a D. Litt in 1967 and the Delhi University followed suit in 1973. He earned high acclaim in India and abroad. He was a visiting lecturer at Michigan State University in 1958; and lectured at many reputed institutions of America such as the University of California, Kansas University, Yale University and Yassar College. Though his novels were first published in England, he is the best known Indian novelist in America. Narayan is the first Indian writer to have been included in 'The Writers and Their Work', a series of monographs published by British Council. Narayan was pious and religious by nature. He began his day by reading a little bit of Puranas, Sanskrit sacred poems after which he repeatedly recited himself the Gayatri Mantra, a prayer to the light that illuminates the sun to illuminate all minds. As a novelist and creator of Malgudi, Narayan enjoys international fame which is imperishable. R.K. Narayan passed away on May 13, 2001. Malgudi lives on. And so does his writing.

4. CONCLUSION

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (10 October 1906 – 13 May 2001), was an Indian writer known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He was a leading author of early Indian literature in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao.

Narayan's mentor and friend Graham Greene was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *English Teacher*. The fictional town of Malgudi was first introduced in *Swami and Friends*. Narayan's *The Financial Expert* was hailed as one of the most original works of 1951 and Sahitya Akademi Award winner *The Guide* was adapted for film and for Broadway. Narayan highlights the social context and everyday life of his characters. He has been compared to William Faulkner who also created a similar fictional town and likewise explored with humour and compassion the energy of ordinary life. Narayan's short stories have been compared with those of Guy de Maupassant because of his ability to compress a narrative.

In a career that spanned over sixty years Narayan received many awards and honours including the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature, the Padma Vibhushan and the Padma Bhushan, India's third and second highest civilian awards. He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's parliament.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

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