



R.K. NARAYAN AS AN ADEPT IN TECHNICAL PERFECTION IN TREATMENT OF THEMES: AN APPRAISAL

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R.K. Narayan, a prolific writer of novels, short stories and essays, is one of the most important and leading figures in the field of Indo-Anglian fiction, who has succeeded in sensitively describing the varied and colourful life in the twentieth century India. Rasipuram Narayan, the father of the regional novel in India, was born in 1906 in Madras and had his early education there. Having graduated from the Maharajah College, Mysore in 1930, he began his career as a local high school teacher but resigned it soon after five years and chose writing as his career. As a writer, he was very keen on the Indian way of daily life by portraying the various types of men and manners rather actually and he is a writer turning nothings of everyday life into things of beauty.

As a novelist and short-story writer, Narayan has achieved an international reputation and his novels have been translated into many foreign languages. In India, he got the Sahitya Academic Award in 1960 for his novels **The Guide** and the Padma Bhushan Award in 1964. The University of Leeds awarded the honorary D.Litt. to him in 1967, while Michigan State University invited Narayan as a visiting Professor. While in the U.S.A., he received the English speaking Union Book Award and was made a fellow of the prestigious American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982, the only Indian writer to be so honoured. He has to his credit publication of the following notable novels: 1. **Swami and Friends** (1935) 2. **The Bachelor of Arts** 3. **The English Teacher** (1945) 4. **The Dark Room** (1949) 5. **The Financial Expert** (1952) 6. **The Guide** (1956) 7. **The Man-Eater of Malgudi** (1962) 7. **Waiting for the Mahatma** (1955) 8. **The Vendor of Sweets** (1970)

Being a writer of average emotions, R.K. Narayan is found springing surprises and even giving mild shocks, but he never indulges in those aspects of life which are morbid. Unsocial activities, perversion or physical violence do not find any place in his fiction. He does not indulge in sensations. He believes in domestic harmony and peaceful relations. He is the only major writer in Indo-Anglian fiction who is free from didacticism or propaganda. He has no desire to preach, to advise, to convert. 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 writers, the crisis in the individual soul and the revolution are the necessary ingredients in fiction”.

Narayan wants to suggest 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 life. Narayan 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 automatism of the past. In the words of Dr. Paul Verghese,

“Though not vehicles of mass propaganda, his novels also depict the breakdown of feudal society and express the changed ideas concerning the family as a unit and the conflict between old and new. But Narayan is more concerned with the analysis of the character of the individual in his course through life”.
(p.42)

Most of Narayan’s characters belong to the middle class, especially to the lower middle classes of South India. Chandran belongs to a 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.

Narayan is a writer of social novels which are interwoven with comic elements. His backgrounds are realistic. Every incident is described with utmost care that they are psychologically convincing. His social life consists of middle and poor classes of Malgudi such as college boys, college teachers, school masters, merchants, Municipal members, tourist guides, taxi drivers etc. Aristocrats, business magnates and rich people have no attraction for Narayan. All the novels of Narayan are set in the surroundings of Malgudi, the quaint little South Indian imaginary town. It is a region, whose particularities were to be gradually unfolded in a series of novels making the region familiar in the mind’s eyes of Malgudi of Narayan. It is his own creation. The town has the river Sarayu as its pride, where lovers can meet, children can play, teachers can bathe and wives can try to drown themselves, the banyan falls hanging over the river pleasantly; all together make a strange and beautiful picture. The town itself includes Lawley Extension, Streets like Kabir Street, Vinayagamudali Street, Abu Lane and Ellaman



Koil Street leading to the river Sarayu. As years go by, Malgudi transforms from a joyful humming town to a busy industrial city as the series of novels record. Narayan improves Malgudi from novel to novel, breathes fresh life into it till it becomes dominant and unavoidable locale that demands more attention than any of Narayan's characters.

Sir Walter Scott has made famous the **Border Countries** for all times, William Wordsworth has glorified **The Lake District** and Thomas Hardy **The Wessex Country** famous for all ages. In the same manner, Narayan's **Malgudi** is a reality charged with all that is intimate and pleasantly piquant in human life:

“All ten novels and most of the short stories are set in Malgudi. Various critics have attempted to identify the original of this mythical town. Srinivasa Iyengar speculates that it might be Lalgudi on the Kaveri or Yadavagiri in Mysore. To these speculations, might add my town, that Narayan's Malgudi is Coimbatore which has many of the landmarks – a river on one side, forest on the others, the mission school and college and all the extensions mentioned in the novels” (Parameswaran, 49)

The novels of Narayan are perhaps the most realistic in the Indo-Anglian field. The life and incidents that he depicts are apt and accurate. When he treats the life of a tourist guide, he elaborately describes all the details of the trade of a tourist guide and also the attitude of guides of his customers. If he describes the life of a Professor of English, he not only analyses the students' mentality but also taxes a period in which the English Professor discusses the most dramatic passage from King Lear's storm scene. When he describes the patriotic fervor, he is not content with the movement alone but brings Mahatma Gandhi on the scene and allows him to stay in the Harijan colony near the river. Narayan's realism is not only apt and accurate but also psychologically convincing. One can find Narayan's realism when Krishna in **The English Teacher** says:

“I did not do it out of love for them or for Shakespeare, but only out of love for myself. If they paid me the same one hundred rupees for stringing beads together or tearing up paper bits everyday for a few hours, I would perhaps be doing it with equal fervor” (The English Teacher, 12)

The very titles of his works seem to be very symbolic and suggestive. As one critic has put it,

“In fact, Narayan's titles deserve serious examination and analysis and warrant a full length study” (Jerurkar, 45).

R.K. 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 every one of us one time or another. His heroes are average human beings and they do not possess extraordinary capacities but through some accident attain greatness very soon to return to their original state. If we take the life of a school boy like Swami, we find nothing extraordinary or strange in his life. Similarly Mr. Sampath, Chandran, Raju, Rosie, Savitri, Ramani and others live, love and suffer in a maze of incidents which are just common place and occur in the world round us. His plots do not follow any standardized formula because Narayan starts with an idea of character and situation and the plot progresses on the lines he conceives to be the logical, development of the idea. It may mean no marriage, no happy ending and no hero of standardized statues. Accidents, coincident and sudden reversal of fortune are used only to a very limited extent; his action mainly develops logically from the acts and actions of his characters. In this respect, Narayan is as much a 'materialist' as Henry James, H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett.

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 for me”. He has created a richly varied portrait gallery – students, teachers, parents, grand-parents half hearted dreamers, journalists, artists, financiers, speculators, film makers, movie stars, sanaysis and women – pious, suffering, coquestish and seductive. It is a veritable world of men and women both real and exotic, brought to life with uncommon dexterity. “His eye and ear are almost flawless” – an eye for visual detail and an ear for how they speak. “His most memorable character – creations”, says Shiv. K. Gilra, “are his great comic eccentrics – Sampath, Raju, Margayya and Jagan.

They are all ordinary men caught in a web of illusions – money, success, love and happiness, each one of them working out of his personal salvation in his own characteristic way. These protagonists are individuals as well as 'universals' in their human aspirations, follies, foibles and ultimate resolutions. It is in such a character – analysis that “Narayan reveals a penetrating human insight”. (p.43) The novelist brings out the contemporary attitude of the society upon religion and the exploitation of it by people like Raju. The character of Raju is handled in a delicate manner in order to bring out that attitude. A Railway guide becomes a Sanaysi, just because of a simpleton like Velan. Raju learns as he earns, and acquires not only intimate knowledge of Malgudi and its surroundings but also human nature. H.M. Williams reflects the theme of the novel as:



“... the theme of innocence betrayed, leading to corruption and redemption. But in this book Raju can never return to his old life, to his job as ‘Railway Raju’, the guide. Instead he becomes a ‘spiritual guide’ and ambiguously, a fraud- turned – honest, whose impersonation turns into a genuine act of self-sacrificed virtue” (p.60)

The character of Raju is not that of a single man, but it is the portrayal of a type. This is the type of people who take advantage of beliefs and customs and exploit the innocents. Raju is the clear-cut; well defined character by which R.K. Narayan is able to bring out the character of those exploiting people. In order to make it more effective, R.K. Narayan makes use of the innocent people of the rural area. Narayan’s vision is essentially moral, for the problems he sets himself to resolve in his novels are largely ethical. This is not to underplay the comic irony of an artist much admired by critics in the West; on the contrary, it is “his comic vitality that humanizes Narayan’s grand vision. The elusive charm of his success is the direct result of a rare combination of comic sense and religious sensibility”. (pp.99-100). No doubt, he is a comedian of the sublime and the ridiculous. His knack for presenting the tragic and the comic does not deter him from presenting his vision of life rather successfully.

To conclude, it may be said that R.K. Narayan is a good work man. He labours hard in providing a work of art. He is not a careless writer. Gentle satire, unfailing good humour and keen observation coupled with sympathy attract readers to his fiction. “He is one of the few writers in India, who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument, pursuing with a sense of dedication what may often seem to be the mirage of technical perfection. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan cannot possibly lower himself”. (Iyengar, 112) Narayan’s art in its various aspects has won universal acclaim and recognition and his handling of the English language is characterized by a rare felicity of expression and smooth unhurried pace. No doubt, R.K. Narayan is “the story-teller per excellence”.

Works Cited

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