

Images of India in R.K. Narayan's Fictions and Novels

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Abstract – Fictitious writing in India is as old as the narrative skills in the Indian life. It gets its origin from the stories and lullabies to children that reflected the life of Indian Societies with diversity in color and cast.

R.K. Narayan, one of the trio, the founding fathers of India in English fiction, the other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao has been portraying India the spirit, the muddled soul, India the United Nations with the ethos that have their beginning in the Indus Valley Civilization founded on the banks of river Indus and the Ganga. Indian ethos, culture, life, systemic beliefs religious practices and principles, the life of Ascetics and Rishis, the sensuous and the sane, the naturalist and the spiritualist and so on. This paper attempts to analyze the India that is portrayed in the fiction of R.K. Narayan.

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The Indo-Anglicans have explored the metaphysical, spiritual, and romantic aspects of the confrontation each in his or her own way. Even when the novel does not deal directly with the Forsterian theme, the personal crisis in the life of each western-educated hero or heroine becomes inter-cultural in nature. The connotation of "east" and "west" varies in these novels as do the levels of their artistic achievement. But the absorption of more cultures than one contributes, in many of these cases, to a heightened receptivity to experience. Also, it confirms and asserts the traditionally multicultural makeup of the Indian ethos.

There are, of course, vast areas of Indian life and living where the West has had no abiding impact, and we find some of the Indo-Anglican novelists dealing successfully with these non-urban, indigenous and inward-looking situations and characters. R.K. Narayan once pointed out in an article that western society is based on a "totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours," and it can certainly be demonstrated that marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian novels than romantic love. There are some novelists who deal with the unchanging values of an Indian small town or village, and find their material in the excitement, strain and the clash of temperaments involved in living under the same roof in a joint family. The joint family has always provided rich fictional material because of the variety and complexity of human relationships that it offers. In some recent Indo-Anglican novels, one notices a sense of nostalgia in treating of the joint family, because, along with its spacious group living marked by un-self-conscious give and take, it also represents

a way of life that is gradually being lost. The nostalgia, however, does not always descend to sentimentality and often the central figures in order to seek their own identities consciously try to break away from the kind of life they are nostalgic for.

And often the motivation of rebellion against the family comes from romantic love. In the article mentioned earlier, R.K. Narayan maintains that the theme of the eternal triangle, that perennial peg of western story-tellers to hang their novels upon, is useless for an Indian writer, our social condition not providing adequate facilities for such triangles. Yet a study of recent Indo-Anglican fiction will reveal that even in the Indian context a triangle is very much present; only, the third side of the triangle is often provided not by an individual but by a more powerful and less defined social force represented by the joint family. Thus this familiar Indian institution serves several purposes in Indo-Anglican fiction: it gives opportunity for the study of human group behavior, it symbolizes an expansive pre-industrial way of life, and it represents a deeply entrenched force of orthodoxy against which the individual may find himself helpless. The last-named can perhaps be read in generalized terms as the conflict between two sets of values: supremacy of social hierarchy, and emergence of the individual.

Sometimes the conflict resolves itself neatly into two issues: duty to the family and personal fulfillment. The fulfillment of oneself, however desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of Western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition, especially when it is achieved at

the cost of duty to the family. The Indo-Anglican novelist thus faces a curious predicament. He is using the language and form of the English novelist, but he has to operate within a totally different frame of reference. Sexual love and personal happiness, those two prime concerns of the Western novelist, do not have such central importance in the Indian context. The classic ideals of the godlike hero and the patient heroine extol the virtues of the extinction of the ego whereas the novel in the western world often focuses upon the achievement of self-hood or personality. One might argue that classical ideals no longer obtain in the Indian context. But in actual literary practice, numerous characters are found to adhere to classic proto-types – especially the women of fiction who persistently re-enact the suffering, sacrificing role of Sita or Savitri.

Another theme that seems to have fascinated many Indo-Anglican novelists is the place of faith in socio-cultural life of India. Adherence to rituals and a simple faith in the superior wisdom of a Guru, shape the action and conduct of many people in all parts of the country.

The imposter gains some material benefit, no doubt, but he also fulfills a social need. Hence the ambivalent quality of the novels those deal with this theme - while the blind faith of the people represents an essential moral weakness as well as a very elemental strength, the people who make a business of spiritualism certainly present an aspect of sin or evil. Sometimes the two issues impinge upon one another and the sheer force of simple trust transforms the evil of man's mind into a reservoir of goodness.

The Guide is a story of a man who deceives a society by passing for a spiritual man in whom the man is carried away by his deception until a point comes when it is difficult to undo the enormous lie. Raju, the protagonist drifts into the role of a Sadhu willy-nilly and once he finds himself cast in the role of an ascetic he attempts to perform the act with gusto; partly for the sake of self-preservation, partly because it suits his personality wonderfully. His illustrious career as a guide began accidentally when he found himself escorting the tourists to the beauty spots around Malgudi. He gives them historical and geographical information and before he knew it he had become a full-fledged guide and the stall in the railway station had become merely a part-time business.

The act that confirms Raju's career as a Sadhu is his establishment of a night school in the temple. This school becomes the nucleus around which the village people gather every evening to listen to Raju's discourses and story-telling. These sessions grow in popularity until Raju becomes a public figure. But the idea of the school originates quite by accident. During his early days as a Sadhu when Raju is not very sure of the manner he should adopt,

he tries to make conversation with the children in the manner of big people he has seen in the cities. When he undergoes fasting, people reach him for Darshan and brought him no food.

Raju is good at his histrionic talents. Part of Raju's success is his ability to identify himself completely with whatever role he is playing but Raju in his part of a saint he has at last reaches a stage when the situation is no longer familiar. When the shadow of famine stalls the country side and cattle begin to die, Raju for the first time confronts a situation in which he does not know how to act. However in the story of Raju, one can see the created object transcending its creator. The saint hood that Raju has created out of his deception ultimately transcends his control and obliterates his former self.

The ideal of asceticism runs through Indo-Anglican fiction as a recurrent and compulsive motif. The ascetic in a saffron robe is a readymade symbol in Indian literature and in the several uses of this symbol; the novelist reveals a great deal himself and his art.

Regarding Malgudi Days, Narayan has always observed Malgudi is changeless, little different from what it was in his Swami and Friends; it has become a kind of ancestral village for the whole literate world subtle and erroneously funny. Malgudi is a bend of oriental and pre-1914 Bangalore like an Edwardian mixture of Sweet Mangoes and Salt Vinegar. Malgudi the little town has always been central to his literary achievement. "I am a treacherous writer when I move out of Malgudi." So attached was Narayan to this town. A town like that has great possibilities. The town is the product of a particular coming together of social relations and above all some "psychic people who undergo transformations as they interact with one another.

Malgudi is Coimbatore which has some of the landmarks – a river on one side, forests on the other, the Mission School and College and all the extensions mentioned in the novels of R.K. Narayan. It is an Indian Hindi language television serial based on the eponymous works of R.K. Narayan spanning over Fifty-four episodes. The serial is collection of short stories by R.K. Narayan. The work was published outside India in 1982 by Penguin Classics. It has Thirty-two stories all set in the fiction town of Malgudi located in South India. Each of the stories portrays a facet of life in Malgudi. Everyone in the town seems to have a capacity for responding to the quality of his particular hour. It is often a mosaic of life that seems to belong to a lost time.

The collections possess a fable tale 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. Most of the episodes

are based on the stories remembered from previous times ranging from not long ago to decades earlier. In this work by R.K. Narayan seems to present us with bleak portrayal of India where life is very hard and there is very little human happiness; he means to reflect the triumph of the human spirit over the cruel circumstances of life. In India poverty and lack of education are discriminated against because they are very poor.

Gandhi's Indian village had its reflection in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, A.K. Ramanujan's portrayal of Indian village time as indefinite and continuous anywhere between a few decades ago and the medieval centuries. Another writer who came under Gandhian spell was Mulk Raj Anand. His *Untouchable* echoed Gandhian values and spirit. In the same line, R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* set in the fictional town of Malgudi echoes Gandhi's philosophy but at the same time like Anand, the novel questions the gap between the religiosity of Gandhian thought and the necessarily mundane interests that motivate ordinary people.

In a country like India, the past influences the social life of the individual. Tracts of human experience are looked at with an opportunity ridiculing eye and with that kind of humor in which the jokes are also a species of moral insight. In his novels, R.K. Narayan asks some questions about good and evil and their roles in human life but also finds answers to them. In doing so, he grafts a realistic narrative of modern South Indian life on an ancient Hindu myth, thus ensuring his questioning and solutions are firmly rooted in his own cultural ethos a consummation which should be the sole *raison d'être* of any Indian fiction in English that hopes to endure as something more than an interesting literary freak.

A truly Indian work would be the one which is about India or Indians, presents an Indian point of view and has a style which fits well into the matrix of the Indian culture and way of life. The revelation of the identity through knowledge of self is the basis for R.K. Narayan's fiction.

R.K. Narayan once pointed out that Western Society is based on a totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours. And this can be illustrated that marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian novels than romantic love. Indian novelists are many in number, who have dealt with the unchanging values of an Indian small town or village and found their material in the excitement, strain and the clash of temperaments involved in living under the same roof in a joint family. The joint family has always provided rich fictional material because of the variety and complexity of human relationships that it offers. Commenting on the western romantic love, R.K. Narayan maintained that the theme of the eternal triangle that perennial peg of western story tellers to have their novels upon was useless for an Indian with our social conditions not providing adequate faculties for such triangles.

A theme which is Indian in shape and spirit is the theme of faith in the socio-cultural life of India, besides adherence to rituals and a single faith in the superior wisdom of a Guru that shape the actions and conduct of many people in all parts of the country. The ascetic or the Sanyasi has always been held in reverence in India because renunciation is an ideal not many can achieve and this explains the prevalence of the cult of the Guru. But quite often pseudo-mystic gurus arise to meet the demands of blind faith and this has been well explained in the novels of R.K. Narayan. Raju in *The Guide* represents a man who deceives society in the guise of a Guru or Sanyasi.

R.K. Narayan's novels have some mythical structure. For instance *The Financial Expert*. This begins with Margayya sitting under a banyan tree in front of the Co-operative Bank with his tin box. In his novels one can see Narayan's mind perceiving existence very much in the way of ordinary men. *The Guide* retells the natural Indian Story of the confident man who becomes in spite by nameplates of the Gods, the man deserving of trust.

"Narayan fastidious art, blending exact realism poetic myth, sadness and gaiety is without precedent in literature in English. It is kind but unsentimental mocking but un-cynical profoundly Indian but distinctively individual. It fascinates by reason of the authenticity and attractiveness of its Indian setting and engages because of the substantial human nature which it implies and embodies."

In R.K. Narayan's early novels, Indian self-sufficiency is brought to the fore through the single device of ignoring the British presence. The British were still in power when Narayan first began to publish. Yet in his novels they are marginal. If they appear at all as in the first scenes of *Swami and Friends* (1935) or in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), they act merely as aggravating but avoidable hindrances to Indian purposes. From the beginning Narayan has of course drawn on a legacy of British rule, the English language as his narrative medium. But though he does not adapt Indian speech rhythms, unlike Raja Rao, he does use the language to demarcate a very own English cultural space, defined by its own beliefs and practices.

As has been observed earlier, one of Narayan's characters, a younger version of the English Teacher also graduates away from the study of English, the dead mutton of classifying, labeling, departmentalizing and moves towards a proper synthesis of life. It is the same transition and cultural change of heart, a move from dependency to self-reliance and greater wholeness that India as a nation will also make. Although R.K. Narayan's novels take care to explicitly deal political subjects,

nationalism and a mythic Hinduism are embedded in the narrative.

Narayan evokes a quietist Indian way of life that gives way before and so eventually absorbs the forces of history, rather than tracing destructively against them. Orientalist scholars and late 19th century orthodox Hindu nationalists promoted comparable images of India as passive, feminine, all accepting and truth seeking, Railways, for example Narayan accepts as central to Indian life 'they are in blood!' (The Guide, 1918) whereas Christianity or a systematized study of English are not - though these may be rationalist as part of the social landscape. The Financial Expert and The Guide treat the theme of nemesis impressively while raising significant questions such as the role of cash nexus in modern Indian Society besides the fate of evil in human life.

R.K. Narayan writes of the middle class, his own class, the members who are neither too well off nor to be worried about money and positions, nor dehumanized by absolute need. His hero is usually modest, sensitive, ardent wry about himself and sufficiently conscious to have an active inner life and to grope towards some existence independent of the family. The family is the immediate context in which he operates and his novels are memorable for the delicacy and precision of the family relations treated: that of son and parents, brother and brother, of husband and wife, and father and daughter as in The English Teacher, of father and son in The Financial Expert and so on. The sadness in Narayan's novels comes from the painful experience. The firmly delineated town, therefore, is the outer circle of the action. Within it is the subtler and more wavering ring of the family; and at the centre of that stands or rather flinches, the Narayan hero, a tentative, spiritually, sensitive, appealingly limited character, the converted con-man as in The Guide and so on. The characteristic Narayan figure always has the capacity to be surprised by the turn of events. His individuality has certain formlessness, a lack of finish, as though the definition of his personality depended upon the play of external affluences, which of course in India, with immense weight of inherited tradition.

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