

R. K. Narayan's Philosophy of Life: A Study of Selected Short Stories in *Malgudi Days*

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Abstract – R.K. Narayan enjoyed wide popularity not only in India but abroad also particularly in England and U.S.A. In America he is regarded next to Faulkner. He was also included in *Writers and Their Works* published by The British Council - only Indian to achieve this distinction. Many of his short stories were broadcasted by B.B.C. - a rare distinction. Both University of Leeds and Delhi University honored him with the degree of D. Litt. Moreover he won Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Guide* (1958) in 1960 and The Indian Government awarded him with Padma Bhushan in 1964 for his achievements. The sole aim of his all writings is to give aesthetic satisfaction. He never considers art as a medium of propaganda as in case of Mulk Raj Anand. He interprets Indian life purely for 'the art for readers'. As a result, the incongruous and the absurd in life does not annoy him, it only amuses him. This has been the characteristic stance of humorists from Chaucer to Modern times. His success as a writer lies in his ability to communicate this spirit of amusement and delight in life to the reader. Narayan is actually a gentle novelist and short story writer who deeply loves his country and his countrymen. His criticism, even when it is bitter and far-reaching, can never be violent and what one gets in his novels perfectly illustrates the gentleness and humanity of his country. As a humanist, Narayan could not possibly accept the dichotomy of town and country. Men are the same everywhere, each born with his own qualities, be they good or bad, and each only fractionally moulded by his environment. Everything is to be found in Narayan's villages - good, evil and murders. Officials are corrupt and inefficient. Narayan masters sufficiently the art of novel writing not to make an in-depth study of corruption. He merely sprinkles his remarks here and there and his casual approach gives them strength as it makes corruption seem a perfectly normal part of life.

Keywords: - Gandhism, Malgudi, Mysticism, Superstitions, Colonialism.

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There are many factors which influence a writer of remarkable sensibility to form a philosophy about life. So far as R.K. Narayan is concerned, he started his career as a writer when the country was preoccupied with getting rid of the British Empire. He began his writings at a time when there was nothing praiseworthy, as far as, life of Indian masses was concerned. There were illiteracy, educational and social backwardness and many superstitions. Indian people suffered from inferiority complex. R. K. Narayan's personal circumstances also added a lot to develop an ironic vision in order to present a mildly satirical presentation of South Indian life. His early failures may have something to do with his tendency to retreat himself. He belongs to a country where it is a disgrace to fail in an examination, where young boys jump into wells, hang themselves or swallow cyanide because they could not pass an examination. He wrote his stories as if Malgudi was the centre of the universe, and the domestic occurrences in a middle class family to the extent they impinged on a school boy or an undergraduate were all that mattered most. So irony with Narayan is like shot

silk showing different colours as it catches the light at different angles.

Yet there is another influence which influenced R. K. Narayan to a great degree. K.R.S. Iyengar, the noted critic historian of Indian writing in English called the period from 1920-1947 as the period of "the Gandhian Age"¹. During this period one cannot deny the influence of Gandhiji on all the spheres of life. During this time Gandhian consciousness became identical with the movements for *Swadeshi*, *Khaddar*, *Charkha*, *Tiranga*, *Satyagraha*, *Swaraj*, *Satya*, *Ahimsa* to protest against the anti-colonial rule with an awakening of a free and regenerated nation. Gandhian consciousness witnessed its scope with the invincible actions and became village-oriented, individual-oriented and anti-imperialistic instinct. R. K. Narayan naturally shows the influence of Gandhian philosophy in his novels and short stories, yet he is not a politically committed novelist like Mulk Raj Anand, nor a metaphysical philosophical novelist like Raja Rao, but he is "Simply the novelist as a

novelist”² as Sarma writes. Gandhiji who had been the greatest man of the 20th century, the inventor of a harmless unique technique for fighting oppression and injustice anywhere in the world, the sole trader in a way of India's epic struggle for freedom, cannot cause a great novel, but the truth remains, Gandhiji has inspired a whole library of books in various languages. The reason for that in my view is that Gandhiji fought for common masses. Similarly R.K. Narayan is also an exporter of ethos of South Indian Hindu middle class families in the background of Malgudi. So R. K. Narayan's Malgudi mirrors time and image of whole India. It is not microcosm but macrocosm which combines the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the mood of the novelist and that of the contemporary world.

Gandhi's immeasurable personality of political vision inspired patriotism and anti-colonialism which spread like legends that multiplied and diffuse through the Indian consciousness. C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly remarks “What interests Narayan is the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high sounding words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose ...”³ Gandhi's political movements raised many issues that attached the British colonial educational system which distorted and suppressed the real face of India. R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The English Teacher* (1945), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) and many short stories protest on common issues of educational and social system. Swaminathan, for example, in *Swami and Friends* (1935) feels offended and sleepy in his scripture class of Albert Mission School, where Ebenezer, the teacher of the school, who is a fanatic Christian, abuses the Hindu deities. Swami tries to heckle him and consequently gets beaten and got his left ear injured. He, however, avenges the insult by delivering to the Head master his father's complain against the teacher. He says that he does not care for his headmaster's dirty school. It is a Gandhi-like protest against British educational system in India rooted by the colonial empire. Mani and Swami listen to Gauri Shanker, a Gandhian in *khaddar*, who addresses, “We are slaves of slaves . . . English is no bigger than our Madras Presidency and is inhabited by a handful of white rogues and is thousands of miles away. Yet we pay in homage before the English men”. They decided “. . . to boycott English goods especially of Lancashire and Manchester cloth and resolved to wear *Khaddar*, the rough home-spun”⁴.

In Narayan's short stories, Gandhi's preaching are echoed at every page. Narayan's heroes embody the greatest virtue of the Hindu way of life in the main street, exactly where Gandhiji wanted them to be. His “Seventh House”, is about Krishan, a common man, whose marriage was an unconventional love marriage. So to avert the influence of Mars and to save the life of his ailing wife, he tries in vain, as advised by his

astrologer, to transfer his love to a prostitute and temple dancer. Finding out all about his characters, with their individual idiosyncrasies, R.K. Narayan does not feel the need to invent the absurd, to promote social theory, to seek sensational subject, or to delve into abnormal psychology to get his reader's attention in his short stories. Actually it takes a great deal of courage and self-possession in a writer-especially a modern writer to write about ordinary, everyday occurrence in the lives of ordinary, everyday people. In the other words, it takes a great deal of talent and truth to keep the readers interested in and enthralled by such writing, story after story, book after book. As R.K. Narayan himself writes, “Everything is interrelated. Stories, scriptures, ethics, philosophy, grammar, astrology, astronomy, semantics, mysticism and moral codes - each is part and parcel of total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence. Literature is not a branch of study to be placed in a separate compartment, for the edification only of scholars, but a comprehensive and artistic medium of expression to benefit the literate and the illiterate alike.”⁵

Gandhian influence is perceptible in Narayan's short stories almost at every page. For the most R.K. Narayan sympathises with common masses of the country. The major themes of his story stories are modernisation, westernisation, caste, prejudice, violence, urban dehumanisation, oppression of women, injustice and many more. In this manner R. K. Narayan's “Father's Help” in *Malgudi Days* (1982) and “A Hero” in *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1987) deal with boyhood exploits. Writer's compassionate and genial humour make these stories utterly charming. Narayan enters into the children world - happy, innocent, mischievous and sad with little problems of life. How easily and naturally, the writer enters into the spirit of childhood, is just clear from the opening lines of the story “Father's Help.”

Lying in bed, Swami realized with a shudder that it was Monday morning. It looked as though only a moment ago it had been the last period on Friday; already Monday was here. He hoped that an earthquake would reduce the school building to dust, but that good building - Albert Mission School - had with stood similar prayers for over a hundred years now. At nine o'clock Swaminathan wailed. ‘I have a headache. (56)

The story reminds us about Swami in the novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935). In the story Swaminathan makes excuses because he does not want to go to school. So he makes a typical Narayan's humorous remark: “That geography teacher has been teaching the same lesson for over a year now. And we have arithmetic, which means for a whole period we are going to be beaten by the teacher” (56).

But Narayan's use of wit is explicit in the words of the father, "Loaf about less on Sundays and you will be without a headache on Monday" (56).

Swami makes a complaint of his class teacher who beats the boys very violently particularly for coming late. As Swami's father tries to make the complaint of Swami's teacher to the Headmaster, Swami goes to school, hesitates to make his complaint and finally feels very happy when he came to know that the headmaster has taken the afternoon off and won't come back for a week. Swami returns the envelope to his father. His father calls him a coward and utters a humorous statement: "Do not come to me for help even if Samuel throttles you. You deserve your Samuel" (62).

In the second short story titled "A Hero" mentioned above from the collection *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1987), title itself is ironical because Swami in the story is a coward. Swami is once again the protagonist. He has to asleep alone in his father's office because his father wants to reform his habit of sleeping with his Granny. Swami initially boasts of his courage; but when his father insists to prove his courage, Swami makes excuses, Poor Swami, who reads in standard second, is forced to asleep alone and he makes a witty remark: "Let me sleep in the hall, Father. Swami pledged. 'Your office room is very dusty and there may be scorpions behind your law books'" (58).

But no excuse helps Swami. He starts abhorring the newspaper for printing that news about the little boy's fight with the tiger that his father had read. He wished that the tiger had not spared the boy, who did not appear to be a boy after all, but a monster. Through the stillness, many kind of noises did not let him asleep. He covered himself so completely that he could hardly breathe. Soon Swami hurriedly got up and spread his bed under the bench and crouched there. He fell asleep and in sleep he was racked with nightmares. He groans and cries that "Aiyo something has bitten me" (59). In a moment father, cook and a servant came in, carrying a light. All three of them fell on the burglar, the most notorious house breaker of the district. Here lies the irony of the situation. Swami who did not have any courage, is being congratulated by the Inspector of police and Headmaster of the school for his grateful service to the police. Though Narayan began writing during the days when the country was going through intense political activity and every Indian's heart beat was in sympathy with those who sacrificed their lives for the nation yet Narayan has practically nothing to say about what happened noteworthy around him. We have no evidence at all in his short stories or novels whether he was influenced by our national leaders, their ideals of freedom movement and their scheme of social progress. Rather, he seems to have viewed all such

perhaps with an amused detachment. As C.D. Narasimhaian rightly says : ". . . indeed, the world-makers and world-for sakers never ceased to amuse him, such was his detachment from everything that was going on around him that it only helped to sharpen his wit and quicken his compassion for everyone, everything, but mainly for what fell within his province. And his province was South Indian middle class . . ."6

Narayan avoids religion also, as scrupulously as he does politics. The result is that, rarely does a reader find in his short fiction, a plot which deals beyond the experiences of a common man. In "Nitya" from *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1987), Narayan presents a fine story based on the principle of 'Generation Gap'. Nitya, a college student of twenty years, expresses his unwillingness to offer his fine and well-cared-for hair to fulfil a vow which was made by his parents when he was only two years old and stricken with whooping cough and convulsions. Nitya, half convinced by his parents goes to the place of worship. But when all the arrangements are made for the tonsure ceremony, he starts arguing with his parents and suddenly leaves the place and avoids a possible rape of his beautiful locks. Thus, in the story, Narayan tries to depict the sentiments and pious feelings of the parents and recklessness and atheistic temperament of students like Nitya. While the old generation respects and wishes to cling to certain customs and values, the younger generation pooh-poohs them.

To conclude, one can state that Narayan's vision is essentially moral, for the problems he sets himself to resolve in his short stories are largely ethical. This is not to underplay the comic irony of an artist, much admired by critics after critics in the West; on the contrary it is his vitality that humanizes Narayan's grand vision. And yet, looking at Narayan, the artist, one cannot be sure about his real attitude; His sense is a strange amalgam of irony and humour. It is difficult to tract him, as it is difficult to tract William Shakespeare, to his real self in his novels and his short stories. He allows himself to suffer, consciously or unconsciously, from 'negative capability' throughout and a great shaft of light illuminates the surroundings and on Raju's lips are the words, "Velan, it's raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs..." Is it "illumination" or "hallucination"? We can be sure about Gandhi's feeling, not about Narayan, the writer's.

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