

R. K. Narayan as A Post-Colonial Novelist

Jyoti*

M.A. English, B.Ed., NET, Assistant Professor, Arya College, Panipat

Abstract – Narayan was born and grown up in a period when English education was already institutionalised in the Indian sub-continent. He received English education and used to write in English from the beginning of his literary career up to the end. However, he is seen to have used the English language and literary form to scrutinize colonialism and depict the Indian society continually under change due to the colonial rule. A part of this endeavour seems to be evident in his attitude towards the English language. His position in this regard is deemed quite ambivalent and complex óhe is aware that English is the language of the colonist, yet he is found to have accepted it for practical reasons. That is, his attitude towards the English language appears to have resulted from and shaped by the reality prevailing in the post-colonial setting. Narayanís life spanned the twentieth century, which meant that he belonged both to an old and a new India. The British presence in India had brought with it a large civil service, an educational system, and railways ñ all of these institutions the people of the subcontinent brought with enthusiasm. The British took English to India and the Indians retained a literary tradition which continues to delight and enrich us. The writer in the colonised country tended to soak up the culture of the colonial power and feel a familiarity and some affection for it, even though the experience of colonialism may have demoralized and destabilized his own colonised culture.

Key Words – English Language, Narayana Novel, Cultural Phenomenon, Soul

-----X-----

The study of the English language and literature in the post-colonial context seems to be a densely political and cultural phenomenon and consequently comes under the purview of the post-colonial writers. One of the fundamental assertions of post-colonialism is that the English language and literature have played a very significant role in propounding colonial ideology aimed at the survival and consolidation of the colonial rule. In other words, the construction of English literary education is part of the colonial cultural design. Many post-colonial writers have attempted to address the issue of cultural domination through the English language and literature.

Narayanís works, with regard to his attitude to the English language would likely to reveal that he endeavours to formulate a synthesis between the Indian element and the colonial one. The colonial education that he received might have influenced his views on the English language since in the classroom he had to see English as the first language, his native language being a second language. English was the most prestigious subject due to political, administrative, social, economic and scientific reasons. Although Tamil, the language of his province, and Sanskrit, the classical language of India, were taught in the school, they were considered inferior in status and provided occasions for jokes. He admits this in his essay English in India-
iBut in the classroom neither of these two languages

was given any importance; they were assigned to the most helpless among the teachers, the pundits who were treated as a joke by the boys, since they taught only the ěsecond languageí, the first being English as ordained by Lord Macaulay when he introduced English education in India."1

I was writing in another tongue. My whole education has been in English from the primary school, and most of my reading has been in the English language, I wrote in English because it came to me very easily."2

Narayan in his first novel Swami and Friends deals with the effect of the colonial rule on the Indian people. The novel discloses that while people feel antipathy towards the British, they are also attracted to the paraphernalia of the colonial power. As a result, the colonial language has been the signifier of power and dignity. In the Albert Mission School, English is the most prestigious subject. Shankarís name is well known because he can speak to the teachers in English in the open class and likewise Rajamís friends respect him because he speaks very good English, íexactly like a European."

In the essay, íFifteen Yearsí, Narayan takes a post-colonial view on this issue, showing his awareness that English is an alien language, yet advocating its use in India for practical purposes. According to

him, the day-to-day reality has made it impossible for the Indians to castigate the English language. He is found to claim that the English language has been an integral part of the Indian reality. In fact, in the Indian context, it has been turned into the Indian English rather than the English of England. Narayan's position seems to echo the statement of Iyengar: "English has become ours; it is not less ours for being primarily the Englishman's or the American's."³ Narayan advocates the cause of English by adopting a post-colonial view- "For me, at any rate, English is an absolutely swadeshi language. English, of course, in a remote horoscopic sense, is a native of England, but it enjoys, by virtue of its uncanny ability, citizenship in every country in the world. It has sojourned in India longer than you or I and is entitled to be treated with respect. It is my hope that English will soon be classified as a non-regional Indian language."⁴

On the whole, Narayan's position respecting the issue of the English language is rather complex. He seems to say that it could have been better if Hindi had taken the place of the English language in India, but presently it seems impossible to put Hindi to that exalted status and, therefore, it will be wise to accept the position of the English language. Again, when he speaks in favour of the English language, he does not mean the King's English; rather he means the language that has been coloured with the Indian context and filled with the vocabulary from the native languages and dialects. In his essay 'A Literary Alchemy', he puts forward his idea of the Indian English which, he thinks, is the inevitable outcome of a natural process- 'We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the English language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression.'⁵

Narayan shows his awareness to the complex issues regarding the position of the English language in the colonial India. He seems to believe that it is impossible to eliminate the English language from the social reality of India. And he suggests the acceptance of the language in its Indianised form. Hence, his attitude towards the English language is formed by the post-colonial reality and utilitarian value. To sum up, as Iyengar comments, 'Narayan Uses the English language much as we used to wear dhoties manufactured in Lancashire but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India.'⁶

Similarly, Narayan shows his dislike for Brown Sahibs and is especially critical of the senior bureaucrats of English India for their lack of humanity, particularly during the national struggle for independence. But this is very explicit denunciation of colonialism something he has acquired by hindsight or is it an attitude that found expression in

the novels that he had already published during the days of the Raj. His criticism of the British and sympathy for the anti-colonial movement came to him, as it were, unwittingly. Swami and Friends is best seen as it betrays an allegiance to imperial authority, even as it seems to support the insurgence against this oppression. Swami's bid to rebel against the British are thwarted or abandoned for one reason or the other. A sustained examination of Swami and Friends suggests, however, that the anti-colonial movement had touched the lives of almost all the Indians in the novel permanently, resulting in their being drawn in to it, even if a few of them were reluctant participants. Swami himself rejects the proselytizing of Mr. Ebenzar, the fanatic Scripture teacher of his school, attends an anti-British rally where he makes the spontaneous gesture of burning his British-made cap, and utters slogans supporting Gandhiji. On a hartal day he damages school property with reckless abandon to support the general strike, comes close to being killed when the police take action against the mob that he had become part of, and is ultimately expelled from school because of his rebelliousness. While his father rebukes him for his actions that hardly makes the father symbolic of colonial authority asserting itself in the last instance. Even his friend Rajam, son of the Police superintendent, the official representative of the Raj, has a moment when he had a momentary sympathy for Gandhiji, indicating how no Indian was unaffected by Gandhiji's message of non-cooperation at that period.

Of course Swami is as influenced by English rule as he is by the intense anti-colonial movement of his time. Everyone's favourite game seems to be cricket, and the ultimate standard of excellence for most people is Rolls Royce! In other words, Swami grows up in a world where picking up some of the coloniser's habits and accoutrements is inevitable, although this does not mean that Narayan is in any way endorsing colonial rule. He indeed, knows that India has become permanently affected by the British presence, just as Lawley Extension (part of Malgudi) had become a landmark for someone like Swami growing up in Malgudi. He is also aware that most Indians were thirsting for independence and ready to attack symbolically some aspects of the British presence, even when they had incorporated other aspects of it in their lifestyles. Moreover, he is aware that the urge to break away from traditional family structures and become self-reliant at the personal level. This is why in almost all of early novels the protagonist usually leaves home for one reason or another, although he or she is forced to return to his or her family eventually. Narayan's point in these books to depict the confused inner life of a fragmented makeshift society that has yet to figure out its past or future, and to show us how his protagonists are marginalized by a fast-changing world.

In his second novel, The Bachelor of Arts, Narayan continues to depict an India agitated by the British

presence, even as Indians appear to be indelibly marked by colonial policies. Chandran, the protagonist of this book, resents the sheer color ignorance of Englishmen like his college principal, Professor Brown, though he admires his teaching and scholarship. Like most Indians of his generation, Chandran indicts these alien presences in their land for their posturing: they will take their thousands or more a month, but won't do the slightest service to Indians with a sincere heart. Nevertheless, not a few Indians that Chandran comes across are influenced by enlightenment principles and admire-albeit grudgingly-icons of English culture. Chandran's education involves constant exposure to Indian teachers who were beginning to assert themselves in all sorts of ways and seem to be on their way to declaring their intellectual independence from Europe. Mr. Gajapathi, his English teacher, is thus not willing to be brow-beaten by the likes of Shakespearean scholars such as Edward Dowden or A.C. Bradley, and even finds faults in Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, although he is also certain that no Indian could ever write English.

It should be obvious from these aspects of *The Bachelor of Arts* that Narayan himself does not have to make explicit anti-British statement in his works of this period, since merely reflecting on the south India of the 1930s makes him a recorder of the intense anti-colonial feeling affecting most Indians at this time. Also, this novel, like the preceding one, depicts an India transforming itself in innumerable ways. Thus when Chandran returns to Malgudi after finding frustration in love and after living the life of a wandering sadhu, the way the narrator registers Chandran's exasperation: "Change, change everywhere. Chandran hated it. Have I been away from every eight months or eighteen years?" Narayan doesn't prevent one from seeing in them now all the anxieties and bewilderments and disappointments of a generation of Indians expelled from the past into a new world, far from being simplistic or superficial portraits of colonial India, Narayan's early novels follows protagonists who undergo a tortuous initiation into modern life in a land in turmoil.

The *English Teacher*, Narayan's autobiographical novel, we realize that he is offering to us something of a bildungsroman of a colonial upbringing where we witness consistently ambivalent responses to induction into the coloniser's culture. Again in this novel the protagonist coloniser's culture while being marked by other aspects of it. As a writer, Krishna cannot quite make up his mind whether to write in English or Tamil, thereby showing his bewilderment and more than a little anxiety about the English influence and uncertainty about future directions he will have to take. At the end of the novel, he resolves to give up his job as a teacher of English because he has had enough of it; he would rather not be part of a system of education.

Narayan's novel *The Dark Room* Rosemary Marangoly George feels that, "This book is essentially critical of the Westernizing of India under colonial rule and is implicitly an endorsement of conservative nationalism."⁷ Shanta Bai, a Type of the new Indian working women, who lures away the husband of the symbolically named female protagonist Savitri. Not only does Shanta Bai work in an office, but she also quotes Omar Khayyam, hates Indian mythological films, and adores Garbo and Dietrich. But because Shanta Bai is portrayed negatively, Narayan is not necessarily critiquing through her the westernizing that was going on in India or upholding the precepts of Hindu ideology or even affirming a conservative nationalism. Again, because the saddened Savitri leaves home only to come back to her philandering husband at the end, Narayan is not upholding the status quo and underscoring the importance of a traditionally ordered society.

Mr. Sampath, the first novel that Narayan published after India's independence, he continues to show his fascination with the fast-changing world around him. Malgudi itself, we learn, has changed overnight. Srinivas, the protagonist of this book, begins his professional line as a journalist dedicated to attacking the abuses accompany that rapidly transforming world. Very much against the caste system and the system of education prevailing in India, he is critical of the rigorous upbringing, fear of pollution of touch by another caste, orthodox idiocies-all the rigorous compartmenting of human being he sees in the world around him. When Srinivas becomes a script-writer for a film company, he thinks of writing a script with a story-line dealing with Gandhi's non-violence, over politics, all kinds of things at one point and about the abolition of the caste system and other evil of society and a land free from foreign domination at another. Towards the end of the novel, Srinivas has a moment when he reflects that the presence of the English in the subcontinent should be seen in perspective. After all, Indian history is replete with stories of the rise and fall of civilizations. British rule, therefore, was destined to pass since seen in the context of the continent's history, "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 overflowed its bounds. But it always had its rebirth and growth."

Thus, Narayan shows through his novels an India that is transforming itself and Indians resisting British rule, absorbing the ideals of Gandhi, or being unable to do so, and coming closer to personal as well as political independence, and yet never succeeding completely to break decisively with past modes of existence. The marvel is that Narayan is able to deal with the major issues facing Indians in the last days of the Raj without engaging frontally with politics in his novels. To have been

able to depict the way India was reacting to colonial rule by transforming itself in all sorts of ways while registering the stress and uncertainty that accompany change so effectively and effortlessly is surely one of the many claims Narayan has to fame.

REFERENCES:

- (1) Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths Gareth and Tiffin Helen. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. p. 23.
- (2) Thiong O, Ngugi Wa. "On the Abolition of the English Department." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, pp. 438-442.
- (3) R. K. Narayan, *English in India*. Ed. S. Krishnan.
- (4) P. S. Sundaram, *R.K. Narayan as a Novelist*, p. 23.
- (5) Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p. 361.
- (6) R. K. Narayan, *Fifteen Years R. K. Narayan...Writers Nightmare: Selected Essays*, p. 26.
- (7) R.K. Narayan, *a Literary Alchemy. A Writers Nightmare: Selected Essays* p. 196-198.

Corresponding Author

Jyoti*

M.A. English, B.Ed., NET, Assistant Professor, Arya College, Panipat