



**R.K. NARAYAN AS A CONSUMMATE TELLER OF TIMELESS
TALES RECORDING THE IRONIC SITUATIONS OF HUMAN LIFE IN THE HINDU
MIDDLE-CLASS SOCIETY**

P.Kottai Samy

HOD, English Department, Theni College of Arts and Science, Theni.

R.K. Narayan is one of the leading figures in Indo-Anglian fiction. He has written about a dozen novels and 151 short stories. His novels can be classified under four categories: 1) the school and college novels of his earlier period such as *Swami and Friends*, *Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*; 2) domestic novels such as *The Dark Room*; 3) novels dealing with money such as *The Financial Expert*, *Mr. Sampath*, *The guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*; 4) political novels such as *Waiting for the Mahatma*. He is said to be the only major writer in Indo-Anglian fiction who is free from didacticism or propaganda. He has no desire to preach, the advice, to convert.

R.K. Narayan is generally known as a novelist of the middle class and his novels present the middle class society. According to Dr. Paul Verghese, “Though not vehicles of mass propaganda, his novels also depict the breakdown of feudal society and express the changes 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.20). Though Narayan failed in his intermediate examinations several times, he graduated at the age of twenty four. His long college career gets reflected in his second novel, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937). Narayan’s family life the milieu in which he was born and grew up and the social changes creeping into the well-knit texture of Indian society, especially of the South, deeply influenced Narayan’s vision as a novelist. He once told Ved Mehta:

“To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots – both in religion and in family... I have these things. I am rooted to the right triangle of Madras, Mysore and Coimbatore none of them more than a couple of hundred miles distant from the others” (p.35)

He spent the first forty five years of his life within this triangle. Narayan had passed most of his life in the communism of joint family life, where everything was in common and no one asked questions about income. Narayan’s milieu and love for family life with all its traditional values find real expression in almost all his novels. Family relations strengthen bonds of closeness and family affords security and contentment. Narayan’s family scenes “permeate warmth and tenderness” (p.63). Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* is described as “a cousin, though how he came to be called so could not be explained since he claimed cousinhood with many others in the town”. A breach in the family tradition or disintegration in family life only brings disaster and disorder. Mali, Rosie, Balu and other characters of Narayan suffer because they rebel against family tradition.

As Narayan is highly acclaimed as a detached observer of life, the reader is easily led to accept him to be so for his so called objective and beguiling presentation. No doubt, he is a novelist par excellence and he can even be called ‘the novelist extraordinary’, for his vision of the society as is found in *Malgudi* is the outcome of his intimate familiarity and involvement only with the people of his community. Born in 1907, in an upper middle class Brahmin family of Madras, Narayan sees South Indian as a fundamentally conservative Hindu society which he realistically presents in most of his novels and stories with the lower middle class common man as his base. The imaginary town that he creates and calls



“Malgudi” has all the qualities of a society Narayan dwells in, and he depicts it with a keenly observant eye. “Its members are neither too well off not to know the rub of financial worry, nor too indigent to be brutalized by want and hunger” (Walter, 17). Having neither original thinking nor independent philosophy to propagate in his novels, he largely subscribes to the Hindu ideals enshrined in the ancient Hindu scripture. Product of the Hindu high caste family, Narayan shares the beliefs, superstitions, traditions, customs and rituals in Indian life. To Ved Mehta, he admitted “his inability to write novels without Krishna, Ganesha, Hanuman, Astrologers, Pandits and Devadasis or temple prostitutes and explained his point of view by adding in his characteristics humble way that in any case that has turned out to be his India” (Baghmar, 359). It is therefore, little surprising that Hindu myths and ideals have gripped Narayan’s mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in most of his novels.

Ours has been a traditional society, admitting and absorbing all change. The huge mass of myths and legends that have accumulated through centuries has become the common repository of the people of the land. These myths and legends and our religious and cultural heritage have shaped our mind and imagination, behaviour pattern and general attitude to life. This influence is so deeply engraved that it finds unconscious expression in the very aspect of his novels. William Walsh is worth quoting when he says, “The religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan’s grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience”. (Pp.166-167).

Malgudi is deeply traditional and caste ridden. Here arranged marriage is a common phenomenon and horoscopes are often compared. This happened in Narayan’s own life. Narayan married Rajam inspite of the fact that their horoscope did not agree. The astrologer of the girl’s side had predicted that Narayan would prove a widower, but he was defeated by Narayan’s own pundit who at the sight of rupees was all praise for Narayan’s horoscope. Narayan lost his wife after five years, and this confirmed Narayan’s belief in horoscopes all the more. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* does not marry the girl he loves because the horoscopes do not tally. This problem crops up in ‘*The Financial Expert*’ as well. The astrology who thinks that the horoscopes of Balu and Brinda do not match, is dismissed with a fee of Rupee one, whereas the one who testifies that the horoscopes match perfectly, is a rewarded with a fee of Rupees Seventy five.

Most of his characters are innocent at large pitted against an unsympathetic environment. They are traditional and superstitions. They believe that everything on earth is preordained and that no amount of human efforts can ease the situation. The heroes of his novels do not control the events but events control them. They are helpless creatures to on by desires and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* who is intensely in love with Malathi, can’t marry her because the horoscopes do not agree. He leaves home and becomes a Sanayasi. In *Mr. Sampath*, Narayan sees the world as being controlled by blind and unpredictable forces. Mr. Sampath, the cunning rogue who dominates the story, is also forced by the circumstances to leave Malgudi forever. The English Teacher, after the death of his wife, finds solace in the world of spirits, and Raju, the Guide, dies a ruined man not because he wanted to die, but circumstances so conspire that the only alternative before him is to become an unwilling martyr. Briefly, the heroes of Narayan depend upon chance or luck for their happiness or unhappiness; if things go contrary, they run away and sometimes even become Sanyasi. Largely, they accept defeat and find happiness in submission to traditional force of the society. Rajiv Taranath rightly observes:



“from average to the extraordinary and back again to a more poignant state of average – seems to be the recurrent movement in terms of interreacting characettes in the marjoity of Narayan’s novels” (p.13)

The characters are dissatisfied either with their own self or with the world around them. Whether it is Raju of *The Guide*, Sampath of *Mr. Sampath*, Swami of *Swami and Friends*, Natraj of *Man Easter of Malgudi* or Ramani of *The Dark Room*, all of them have the same qualities; have the same approach towards life and the world and at the end fall short of nothing but reality. As Dr. Badal observes,

“Narayan’s characters are typically Malgudians roote din the age-old local traditions. His characters belong to Malgudi: His Sampath and Chandran do not play their part, but live, move in and out, talk and laugh, and then disappear only to appear again and again in the familiar sights”. (p.7).

No doubt, 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. His heroes are average human beings of Hindu middle class society and his novels are mainly the novels of characters. His range of characters, like that of Jane Austen, is limited and he chooses his people from the middle classes of South India. But they are drawn with a convincing psychological consistency, Krishnan, Ramani, Savtri, Raju, Rosie, Marco Gajpathi, Shanta Bai, Margayya are some of his memorable creations.

Narayan’s craftsmanship in plot construction does not reveal a consistent quality. He began a tentative and episodic manner in *Swami and Friends* but developed an architectonic sense in his second novel, *The Bachelor of Arts* and his third, *The Dark Room*, reveals some definite signs of technical maturity. Narayan excels as “an artful delineator of character”. He says, “my focus is all on character. “His most memorable character creations” says Shiv. K. Gilra, “are his great comic eccentrics, Sampath, Raju, Margayya and Jagan. They are 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. Narayan’s style embodies his vision of life, the typical life of Malgudi in an extraordinary simple and unpretentious language with no straining after effects. He has remarkable command over English and used it as the medium of storytelling in a simple, natural, lucid and unaffected manner. Moreover, Narayan tries to inject the spirit and tempo of Tamilian idiom into English speech in a natural and unaffected manner. His style is so uniformly simple that the most ludicrous as well as the most serious events are described in the same vein. Simplicity of language and style imparts pointedness to his comic irony. In order to impart naturalness and simplicity, Narayan uses popular Tamil and Sanskrit words in his novels such as ‘almirah’, ‘asura’, ‘bonda’ ‘jibba’, ‘puja’, ‘sadhu’, ‘shastra’ ‘veena’. Etc.

To conclude, Narayan’s simple style of narrations holds up a mirror to the simple, occasionally ambitious and the relaxed way of living of the Malgudians, representing the middle class Hindu society. In short, R.K. Narayan is at his best, a consummate teller of timeless tales, recording the ironic situations of human life in the Hindu middle class society.

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