

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

R.K. NARAYAN AS A SOCIAL REFORMER BEHIND MASK

Dr. SANJAY KUMAR

Email: sanjaytanan@gmail.com



Dr. SANJAY KUMAR

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Narayan as a social reformer. Narayan minutely observes the society and presents most realistic picture charged with gentle irony and light humour. His approach to subject matter is always marked with intellectual inspirations. His novels are teemed with social consciousness. Narayan exposes the ills of society and probes them too, but never for sadistic pleasure or for scating disgust in readers. His chief aim is to highlight the hypocrisy of ideals, ambition and pride and not to guide the society in any particular direction but simply to make us realize. The paper accesses on how Narayan expresses his dislike of Dowry system. He is also critical of caste system in Indian society. He condemns caste or class division in almost every novel. He furthermore dislikes the system of childhood marriage. Thus the intent behind this paper is to explore the novels of R.K. Narayan assuming social consciousness on the nucleus.

Keywords: Social Reformer, Society, Dowry system, Class division, Childhood Marriage.

INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan's fiction forms the matrix of triumph for Indian creative literature in English. Narayan's fifty years of fiction writing earned him immense reputation both in India and abroad. The most fascinating feature of his personality is that he is a pure Indian both in thought and spirit despite his preference for English over his mother language for the expression of his creative urge. His fiction mirrors the microcosmic India caught in the crucible of tradition and change. M.K. Naik opines, "R.K. Narayan is the novelist of the individual man, just as Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist of the social man, and Raja Rao that of metaphysical man."¹

Narayan chooses a central character through whose view point he looks at the various aspects of society as a silent onlooker. Mulk Raj Anand is a humanist and, therefore, to bring out human predicament is his prime concern. *Coolie* is a

study of village boy's sufferings who because of poverty is compelled to work as a servant. *Untouchable* introduces us the miserable condition of outcastes. *Two leaves and a Bud* exposes the exploitation of the peasants by the Assam Tea Estate owners. Anand's concern, therefore, is the economic exploitation and class distinction.

The novels *The Village*, *Across the Black Water* and *The Sword and the Sickle* is his sharp reaction against the traditional values of village society. *The Big Heart* Presents an intimate picture of class and caste segmentation to which Anand himself belongs. *The Old women and cow* depicts the pitiable condition of peasant in post-independence days. *Private life of an India prince* deals with the dying feudal system in India. We, therefore, see that Anand too, like R.K. Narayan, is sharply aware of society and its all happenings. Yet there is remarkable difference in between the two.

Mulk Raj Anand looks angrily at the oddities and eccentricities of society but R.K. Narayan stares patiently and smiles.

Raja Rao is a metaphysical man. All his novels are charged with metaphysical. His *kanthapura* presents the impact of Gandhian philosophy during the days of Non-cooperation Movement as well as the glory of Hindu mythology. *The Serpent and the Rope* presents symbolical difference between illusion and reality in Indian tradition. *The Cat and Shakespeare* deals with some middle class families of Kerala during the period the Second World War. Raja Rao sees everything in the process of metaphysics. Yet his novels are enriched with social consciousness.

R.K. Narayan is neither angry like Mulk Raj Anand nor philosophical like Raja Rao. Narayan's social consciousness is conspicuous in his novels, yet his awareness is covered with a blanket of irony. He maintains a frontier of norms in his fictional writing and therefore is free from all partiality. K.R.S. Iyengar explains how his artistic excellence is maintained under a limitation:

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.²

Narayan minutely observes the society and presents most realistic picture charged with gentle irony and light humour. His approach to subject matter is always marked with intellectual inspirations. His artistic excellence lies in authentic exploration straightforward manner. Narayan's novels are teemed with social consciousness in human relationship. K.N. Sinha rightly observes, "He is keenly aware of the fundamental irremediable incongruities which life and world are confronting with us."³

He accepts the reality as it presents before him. He sees the society and its developments with an ironic detachment and accepts reality ungrudgingly. He sees no point in attempting to criticize or correct things because, as he remarks in *Mr. Sampath*, it seems to him "a futile and

presumptuous occupation to analyse, critics and attempt to set things right anywhere." (p. 63). Narayan's central character shows us everything that occurs in the every walk of society. R.S. Singh explains Narayan's art and object of fiction writings:

Narayan's male characters are aware of social and political changes, but they do not take sides, nor do they commit themselves to any ideology. Narayan imbues them with social awareness and sense of responsibility only to the extent it helps him to bring out their human qualities.⁴

He exposes the ills of society, and probes them too, but never for sadistic pleasure or for scattering disgust in readers. His chief aim is to highlight the hypocrisy of ideals, ambition and pride and not to guide the society in any particular direction but simply to make us realize.

Narayan's early novels are a sociological study of people's manners and mentality in pre-independence days. *Swami and Friends* highlights the existing manners as well as the impact of National movement on common folk. *The Bachelor of Arts* is a probe into the everyday incidents in a Hindu household in South India and also the odd traditional norms of society. *The Dark Room* demonstrates the typical Indian attitude to family life and exposes the predicament of common house wives of our society who are exploited by all means in their life. *The English Teacher* tells a tragic love story of the divine separation of two souls, with an anterior motif of satirizing the fault in existing education system which "makes us (nothing but) morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices" (p. 206).

The middle novels are Narayan's exploration into the manners and behavior of people in post-independence era. The novels highlight the people's "modern desire for wealth"⁵ asserts Graham Greene. *Mr. Sampath* is a story of a cunning rogue who without any corresponding ability wants to earn enormous wealth in a very short while. William Walsh remarks that "*The Financial Expert* is an exact account of village usury and city deceit and a controlled probing into the motives of money-marking."⁶ Both *Sampath* and *Margayya* represent the modern man who aspires to touch the sky in a

jump and ultimately come back to the same old ground. *Waiting for the Mahatma* presents the socio-economic condition in the days of National Movement. It moreover highlights the impact of Mahatma Gandhi on the different strata of society. *The Guide*, the most talked about novel, is appreciated for “depicting the ironies of modern Indian life”⁷ says William Walsh.

Narayan’s metaphysical spirit is reflected from his later novels, based mostly on Indian myths. William Walsh again remarks, “We see that the religious sense of Indian myths is a 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. What one can say about Narayan without qualification is that he embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism.”⁸

Narayan is free from any partiality, which lacks in the case of Raja Rao, in all his mythical novels. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is based on the Hindu mythological legend of Bhasmasura. *The Vendor of Sweets* is based on the Hindu concepts of cyclical existence and four stages of human life. It simultaneously highlights the confrontation of tradition and modern in Indian society. *The Painter of Signs* exploits with adroitness the story of ancient king Santhanu mentioned in *The Mahabharata*. The latest novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* in chiefly an exploration of philosophical Indian myths and metaphysical parables of Hindu religion.

Living absorbed in religion and family, Narayan is quite familiar with the developments within an Indian family. William Walsh rightly observes:

The family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates and novels are remarkably for subtlety and conviction with family relationship is treated.⁹

He highlights the importance of a mother in *The Bachelor of Arts* and says, “Mother is a sacred object. It is a commodity whose value we don’t realize as long as it is with us” (p. 98). He realizes us that if Kailas had been a mother to look him after, he would have not been spoiled. Narayan, furthermore, believes that parents should deal

firmly with their children because “only a battered son will grow into a sound man” (p. 36).

Mr. Sampath too thinks that “boys must be chastised, otherwise (they will) grow into devils” (p. 34), and hence he advises his son’s tutor, “Any time you see him getting out of hand, don’t wait for me. Thrash him; thrash him well . . . no boy who has not been thrashed has come to any good” (p. 93). Narayan expresses his dislike of Dowry system and suggests the young celibates in *The Bachelor of Arts* that, “If one has to marry one must do it for love, if there is such a thing, or for the money and comforts. There is no sense in shutting your eyes to the reality of things” (p. 155).

Narayan is critical of caste system in Indian society. He makes us see in *The Vendor of Sweets* that if grace fears to come India or Chandran to marry his sweetheart Malati—caste or class barrier happens to be the reason. Our society is ridden with caste and class feelings and hence when Jagan claims, “We don’t believe in caste these days” (p. 72), or Raju says in *The Guide* “there is not caste or class today” (p. 72), we know pretty well how untrue they are.

Narayan condemns caste or class division in almost every novel uninvolved yet in *The Bachelor of Arts*; he fails to maintain his detachment and says, “If India must go-community, caste, sects, sub-sects, and still further divisions” (p. 56). He furthermore dislikes the system of child-marriage and appreciates such “rational and modern, people who abhorred the custom of rushing a young child into marriage,” (p. 55). There is nothing in his work of the angry reform which informs the fiction of Mulk Raj Anand. Narayan’s work contains no scalded sense of social injustice, no artificial anguish, no colonial indignation, and yet Narayan is clearly as Indian as any other Indian writer.

CONCLUSION

We thus arrive at the conclusion that Narayan is an unidentified social reformer who is keenly aware of the various absurdities and eccentricities of society and suggests ironically the ways for their removal. It is; therefore, right to say that the story of Ram Gopal in *Mr. Sampath* is the story of Narayan’s own that had almost “devoted his life to the abolition of the caste system and other

evils of society. His ultimate ambition in life was to see his motherland free from foreign domination. He was a disciple of Gandhi's philosophy, practicing 'Ahinsa' (non-violence) in thought, word and deed" (p. 98). Narayan presents in his novels "Gandhi's plea for non-violence with a new significance, as one of the paths of attaining harmony in life; non-violence in all matters, little or big, personal or national, it seemed to produce an unagitated, undisturbed calm both in a personality and in society" (p. 95).

Thus, the intent behind this study is to explore the novels of R.K. Narayan assuming social consciousness on the nucleus. All his novels form the simple sad comedy to the mythical nature later parables is born in the smithy of social awareness. He is not an angry old man, nor a politician championing the cause of the masses. But he is a merchant of human metaphors, an artist with milk of human kindness flowing full in his heart. His fiction in its totality is an extensive- metaphor on man on the centre of society.

WORKS CITED:

1. Naik, M.K. *The Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K. Narayan*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983. p. 1.
2. Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996. p. 359.
3. Sinha, K.N. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1979. p. 169.
4. Singh, R.S. *Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1977. p. 57.
5. Greene, Graham. *Introduction to the Financial Expert*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. p. VIII.
6. Walsh, William. *R.K. Narayan*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1983. p. 72.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.166-67.
9. Walsh, William. *Indian Novelists in English*. The Times of India, October 2, 1965.