
R. K. Narayan's Philosophy: His Themes and Characters

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan broke India's greatest English language through with the help of Graham Greene, his mentor and friend. His themes in his stories and novels find a vivid life from historical observation of common place incidents and humdrum life. Narayan is considered the first and foremost an artist in his presentation of Indian life, culture and tradition. He covers the wide gamut of human experience from the innocent pranks of children to serious communal riots, misery of common man to filial relationship, superstitions and orthodox social traditions to the supernatural elements. Malgudi is a fictional town of R.K. Narayan, where his literary works take origin. The study of the family and various family relationships, the renunciation, generational disaffiliation, conflict between tradition and modernity, the East-West encounter, education, etc. are his other themes.

Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan is one of the founding pillars of Indian Writing in English. On October 10, 1906 R.K. Narayan was born to the couple, Rasipuram Venkatarama Krishnaswami Iyer and Gnanambal in Chennai, India. He was brought up by his grandmother, Parvathi who also took care of his early education. He was interested in reading English literature, but he struggled with formal education.

Narayan received his B.A. degree from Maharaja's College (later the University of Mysore) in 1930. After completing his graduation, Narayan took a job as a school teacher in a local school. Soon after, he realized that the only career for him was in writing, and he decided to stay at home and write novels. He was supported in every way by his family. In 1933 Narayan married Rajam whom he loved, against the Indian custom of arranged marriage. They had only child, a daughter named Hema in 1938. Narayan's domestic happiness was short lived. Unfortunately, his wife, Rajam died of typhoid in 1939. He never remarried. He created a number of female characters in his writings based on Rajm.

Narayan is credited with bringing Indian literature in English to the rest of the world, and is regarded as one of novelists. Narayan broke India's greatest English language through with the help of his mentor and friend, Graham Greene, who was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books, including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher. Narayan's works also include The Financial

Expert, hailed as one of the most original works of 1951, and Sahitya Akademi Award winner The Guide, which was adapted for films in Hindi and English languages.

R. K. Narayan may not be a philosopher, but his subject matter related to the basic philosophy of Hinduism, i.e. the stories, myths, legends and incidents from the Vedas, the Puranas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagawad Gita. One can find Indian culture and tradition, ideologies and views of Indian philosophy and thought in Narayan's writings.

Narayan's the themes in his stories and novels find a vivid life from historical observation of common place incidents and humdrum life. It presents the basic theme of Narayan's stories and novels as the place of man in this universe and its predicament and Narayan as the first and foremost an artist in his presentation of Indian life, culture and tradition. It highlights Narayan's stories as quite attractive. He covers the wide gamut of human experience from the innocent pranks of children to serious communal riots, misery of common man to filial relationship, superstitions and orthodox social traditions to the supernatural elements. He is actually a sensible novelist and short story writer who deeply loves his country and his countrymen. His criticism can never be violent, even when it is bitter and far-reaching. What one gets in his novels perfectly illustrates the gentleness and humanity of his country.

Narayan's stories begin with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of a cross-section of Indian society, with characters of all classes. Gradually fate or chance, oversight or blunder, transforms mundane events to preposterous happenings. Unexpected disasters befall the hero as easily as unforeseen good fortune. The characters accept their fates with an equanimity that suggests the faith that things will somehow turn out happily, whatever their own motivations or actions. Progress, in the form of Western-imported goods and attitudes, combined with bureaucratic institutions, meets in Malgudi with long-held conventions, beliefs, and ways of doing things.

Malgudi is a fictional town of R.K. Narayan, where his literary works take origin. It is like a landscape as alive and active as a personified character. The fictitious region is woven in such a smooth thread that it creates a fine fabric of inseparable part of Narayan's realistic art. It is as remarkable a place in literature as *Border Countries* of Sir Walter Scott, *Lake District* of

Wordsworth, and The Wessex of Thomas Hardy or *The Five Towns* of Arnold Bennet. It is a town created from Narayan's own experiences, his childhood, and his upbringing. The people in Malgudi are the people he meets every day. He thus creates a place which every Indian could relate to. A place where you could go "into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure, a stranger approaching past the bank, the cinema, the hair cutting saloon, a stranger who will greet you, we know, with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open the door to yet another human existence".

Most of Narayan's stories are set in Malgudi. Critics have attempted to find out the origin of this mythical town. K.R.S. Iyengar speculates that it might be Lalgudi on the Kavery or Yadavagiri in Mysore. Uma Parameswaran believes that the city of Coimbatore largely satisfies the local colour portrayed in Malgudi. However, one is not likely to arrive at any definite answer as to its geographical location even if one refers to all the references to the town in his novels and stories. The simple reason is that Narayan has not drawn any map or framework of reference for his Malgudi, as Faulkner, for example, did for his Yoknapatawpha or Hardy had set for his Wassex novels. Iyengar devotes three pages of careful descriptions of Malgudi and its environs. That Malgudi is not Narayan's perversion of Lalgudi (as suggested by Iyengar) has been ruled out by Narayan himself both in his autobiography *My Days* and in an interview with Ved Mehta. All the same, Narayan has given it an entity of its own and made it a convincing town with its local and regional trappings.

R. K. Narayan's stories reveal a variety of human life. One can find the artistic zeal, integrity, craftsman and imaginative power in his work. The assessment that "Narayan is a story teller, nothing less and seldom more" points out to the source of R. K. Narayan's strength rather than that of his weakness. Narayan state: I'd be quite happy if no more is claimed from me than being just a story teller, only the story matter, that's all.

Narayan's Themes and Characters

Narayan's stories belong to the native Indian soil and are reminiscent of its culture. They mainly depict the Indian life and clearly express his view of the world and those who live in it, simple but a fascinating plot, lively characterization, strict economy of narration and subtle simplicity of language are some of the most outstanding features of these stories.

The themes of Narayan's stories and novels seem to be of perennial interest especially to a sensitive mind interested in human beings. The themes of Narayan are all dependently inter-related and inter-connected. One of them is man's susceptibility to self-deception which is the most recurrent providing excellent field for Narayan's comedy. The study of the family and various family relationships, the renunciation, generational disaffiliation, conflict between tradition and modernity, the East-West encounter, education, etc. are his other themes. Through his themes Narayan reinforced the concerns and motifs of his writing in his long career like exile and return, education (in the widest sense of the term), woman and her status in the society, myths and the ancient Indian past, tradition and modernity, Malgudi and its culture, appearance and reality, the family and so on.

Through his themes and characters Narayan ploughed the literary soil and has made it fertile. The simplicity and apparent transparency of his style might give the reader the impression that Narayan is easily read and understood but at the same time he has many hidden depths so if a reader who is not tactful or willing to look beyond the obvious is likely to read him much less effectively. Narayan's success lies in individualizing his characters and exposing the unnoticed, subtle possibilities of the average and the unremarkable. His characters appear natural as he observed thoroughly and closely life's little incidents, a healthy sense of humour coupled with irony and satire.

In his novels Narayan creates a recognisable Indian community, peopled by various human types -astrologers, clerks, criminals, guides, dancers, painters, hotel owners, tailors, uncles, nephews, fathers, mothers, sons, siblings, students and historical figures. Types are universal, but in Narayan the universal is informed by a particularity of apprehension of the typical. In addition, he also gave a mythological dimension to Malgudi by naming the river there as Sarayu and by placing ruins, forests and mysteries at the heart of his imaginary town.

S. Krishnan says that Narayan "is a story-teller par excellence" whose humanity, affection for his characters, "gentle irony" and "over-powering sense of humour" explain his appeal. Though Narayan's purview seems unpromisingly provincial and his characters caught in the shallows of sticky indigence, he strikes universal chords of emotion and passion with a sure touch. He excels

in conjuring up a scene, a personality clash, between father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother, through fine-grained detail, apt to mood and atmosphere.

The sincere and considerate attitude to people and to outer world, peculiarity and originality of characters in his works, and sympathy and susceptibility towards urgent social problems all these qualities make Narayan an original and a truly Indian writer. His success lies in individualizing his characters and exposing the unnoticed, subtle possibilities of the average and the unremarkable. His strength of characterization lies in his thorough and close observation of life's little incidents, a healthy sense of humour coupled with irony and satire. He gently pushes the readers right into the midst of life that he is presenting. Entertainment and readability are the keynotes of his stories.

In his story, Lawley Road, Narayan presented the theme of independence, corruption, power, loyalty and identity. It is the first person narration by the Talkative Man. 'Lawley Road' satirizes the ways of municipalities.

In the story An Astrologer's Day, Narayan satirizes the fake astrologer and credulous masses. It seems that as long as the people are gullible, the deceivers will continue to thrive.

He depicts commonplace situations, sees incongruities and maladjustments and with this material builds up stories that not only reveal men and manners, but also provide a great deal of diversion and entertainment. A number of Narayan's stories like "The Mute Companion", "At the Portal", "Four Rupees", "Flavour of Coconut", "The Comedian" etc. deal with common life, simple episodes and simple characters. "Flavour of Coconut" deals with a real life episode. It gives a funny description of the hunt and trial of a little mouse which has been guilty of rattling the vessels, ravaging the food-stuffs, puncturing veil sarees and biting the younger members of the household in their soles. "Four Rupees" is a brilliant story that deals with an amusing episode about a poor man who risks his life by getting into a well to take out a fallen vessel. Ranga, a jobless labourer, is caught in an ironical situation when he unwittingly agrees to pull out a bucket from a deep well.

Simple day-to-day episodes like Swaminathan's unwillingness to go to school, his father's stubborn insistence, and the caning by the teacher Samuel ("Father's Help"); Kutti's panic at the

sight of cinema men who want to take her to the studio ("The Performing Child"), Swamy's fear to sleep alone in the darkness ("A Hero"); a mother's anxiety when her son doesn't turn up in the night ("Mother and Son") etc. have been turned into delightful and amusing stories that linger long in the reader's mind.

However, Narayan's treatment of the theme of the suffering and misery of man is suffused with a touch of sympathy. A gambler ("Wife's Holiday"), a pick-pocket ("Trail of the Green Blazer"), a labourer ("Four Rupees"), a beggar ("The Mute Companion"), a servant ("Leela's Friend") etc. can elicit his sympathy and stir his feelings to the point of creativity.

Narayan has quite a few stories based on the innocence and mischiefs of children. These stories are characterised by an element of irresistible appeal, fun and innocent humour. The stories are remarkable for their loving presentation of the creative imagination of children. "Dodu", "Father's Help", "A Breach of Promise", "Hero", "Leela's Friend", "The Regal", "A Shadow" and "Unbroken Doll" are the stories that deal with children. There are still other stories on children which include "Sweets for Angels", "Trail of the Green Blazer", "A Willing Slave" etc.

"Mother and Son" and "Man-Hunt" are stories on unemployment problem in our society. . In "Mother and Son" Narayan presents a purely domestic story of despair and frustration of an unemployed youth and a vivid analysis of human emotion of motherly affection and love. "Man-Hunt" is about the desperate search of a youth for a job. But the story turns out to be a funny one because of the comic situation arising out of the error in identifying the missing person.

The group of "Animal Stories" consisting of "Flavour of Coconut", "At the Portal", "Chippy", "The Blind Dog", "Attila" and "Mute Companions" shows Narayan's sympathy with birds and animals. In these stories Narayan's keen observation of the plight of animals and his understanding of their sentiments find a beautiful expression.

In the story, Under the Banyan Tree, Narayan reveals the themes of story-telling, isolation, hardship, escape, fear, failure, loyalty and selfishness.

In "A Horse and Two Goats" Narayan describes the humorous encounter between Muni, a poor man with an American who wants direction to the next gas station. The encounter takes place

when Muni comes to the edge of the village with his two goats and sits near the statue of a horse as the goats continue nibbling.

The story, A Snake in the Grass, reveals a realistic incident such as the entry of a snake into the compound of a house, is fictionally represented here. It has a striking beginning, an arresting middle and a satisfactory end, which, in fact, are the characteristic features of a Narayan-story.

In the story The Shelter, Narayan illustrates that sometimes, the events are presented as they are, without any mystifying effect added to them. A husband and wife, who have separated, chance to meet under a banyan tree while they are seeking shelter on a rainy day. They make their efforts to come closer, mentally, but their old habit of disagreement lets them down even at this juncture. Unable to put up with the man's overbearing nature, the woman runs away from him unmindful of the heavy rain.

Narayan's stories are simple stories of common folk with the characters from everyday life. He presented them with little ironies and knots of satire. His stories end happily and he comically reveals the life and yet does not allow the cynicism or mockery to enter the world of his creation. He reveals the ironies of life impressively.

Narayan creates his Malgudi familiar and dear to his readers. His Malgudians are common men and women. Whatever the theme he selects he maintains suspense till the end and he made his readers to wait eagerly what will happen next.

Conclusion

Narayan is one of the founding pillars of Indian Writing in English. Indian culture and tradition, ideologies and views of Indian philosophy and thought appear in Narayan's writings. The themes in his stories and novels find a vivid life from historical observation of common place incidents and humdrum life. Narayan is regarded as the first and foremost an artist in his presentation of Indian life, culture and tradition. He covers the wide gamut of human experience from the innocent pranks of children to serious communal riots, misery of common man to filial relationship, superstitions and orthodox social traditions to the supernatural elements. He is actually a sensible novelist and short story writer who deeply loves his country and his countrymen. What one gets in his novels perfectly illustrates the gentleness and humanity of his

country. Naryan's stories are simple stories of common folk with the characters from everyday life. The themes of Narayan's stories and novels seem to be of perennial interest especially to a sensitive mind interested in human beings.

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