



R. K. NARAYAN AND HIS CHARACTERS : A PERSPECTIVE

DR. K. KOTESWARA RAO

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ABSTRACT

Narayan creates a world of his own experience, tinted with humour which is the hallmark of Narayan's genius. Every character drawn in his novels is convincing and realistic. Narayan reflects the spirit of the age in his later novels, because his insight into life grows deeper, and he judged the Indian life of his time in a dispassionate manner. His art lies in artistic impersonality and interpretation of Indian life aesthetically with unprejudiced objectivity. Yet Narayan has presented even simple characters with perfect accuracy, and they turn out to be true representatives of Indian society. This makes his novels more acclaimed among the common people.

INTRODUCTION

The Financial Expert is the story of a proud money lender, Margayya. The novel depicts the ups and downs of the life of a modern man in Indian society. This story tries to show the innermost truth of Indian life. Malgudi forms the setting of this novel. Walsh calls Margayya, the hero of the novel, Probably Narayan's greatest single comic creation." Margayya shows the 'Marg' or the way to others. The theme of the novel is lust for money, but Margayya is no monster of wickedness. R.K.Naryan has succeeded in humanizing him. Narayan showed that despite his lust for money, Margayya is a human being like us. This novel is a general satire on growing independence which has shaken the age old joint family system in India. Margayya and his brother are next door neighbours but they are not on speaking terms. R.K.Narayan is a sensitive writer and he feels that the sense of kinship is always strong despite apparent differences. Margayya and his brother are always ready to share each other's

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joys and sorrows. The functioning of various organizations like co-operative banks and financial organizations has also seen satirized.

Narayan's Indianness is further seen in various other ways. He has a great regard for family ties and pieties of the home and the family. Human relationships, particularly domestic relationships, occupy a central place in his novels. If the accepted norms are violated, the order is disturbed; the order is restored, and normalcy established once again as a result of the influence of the family. This stress on the role of the family shows his Indianness. This is clearly seen in *The Financial Expert* and his other novels. Today anywhere in India we come across people like, Margayya, as many as possible, who always run after money. The tales from the Hindu mythology, the teachings of *The Bhagavadgita*, and the austere religious practices and beliefs their ordained add Indianness to the fictional art of R.K.Narayan. Margayya requests the priest, "I want to acquire wealth. Can you show me a way? I will do anything you suggest" (p.36). This attitude of Margayya is a fine example of the human tendency of becoming desperate to realize one's ambitions, often overlooking the adverse effects in pursuing them. At last as Indian philosophy is considered, Narayan tries to reconstruct the often observed pattern in reality that material assets are of no use. If the basic integrity and sympathy are lost, if one's attitude is gaining riches is selfish and singular. This suggests the eternal truth that the will and destiny of an individual are inextricable. It is the individual, whether it is Malgudi or any part of India, who is ultimately responsible for his fate and that, is the case of Margayya. Thus *The Financial Expert* is a mockery of modern materialistic civilization in which we are visionaries seeking phantom success.

Narayan produces a realistic picture in the novel *The Guide*, which is Indian both in its theme and atmosphere. Malgudi is not only a background of Narayan's novels but it is a leading character. Characters in *The Guide* are full of life and vitality. Raju, popularly known as 'Railway Raju' is the central figure in the novel. He is the most complex character of Narayan according to Paul Varghese. Rosie is one of the butterfly-type of women who frequently appears in the novels of Narayan. She is the heroine of the novel. Marco, the husband of Rosie is an enigmatic character, who also frequently appears in most of Narayan's novels. Velan is another minor character to whom Raju narrates his past story. Raju's mother is another minor character who leaves her son because of his infatuation with Rosie.

Raju is the average man catapulted into strange experiences. Narayan has in this novel explored the possibilities of the strange and sudden rise and fall of the life of Raju. He shows psychological insight into the human mind and characters. Narayan shows Rosie as a victim of Indian traditional class system. By presenting Raju and Rosie's characters, Narayan points out the inconsistency and makes imbalance in human life. We come across such characters in many Indian novels and even such people are around us without our notice. Narayan subtly

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suggests the tragedy and miserable failure of Rosie, the victim of the system. The chief characters of the novel Raju, Rosie and Marco are social types. For viewers of R.K.Narayan, Raju is a fake character. The typical situations taken from the Indian setup underlines the simple style of R.K.Narayan with physical shades.

Narayan brings out the credulous and superstitious nature of villagers of India in *The Guide*, who believe in Sadhus and any fraud and cheat can easily impose himself upon them and make them worship him as Guru or Mahatma. Raju is able to deceive them quite easily; they worshiped him, heaped food and other offerings upon him. They accept him as their spiritual guide and mentor. When there is drought and famine, their reaction is typically Indian. One villager wants to know if 'the rains fail' because 'the movement of aeroplanes disturbs the clouds', while other seeks to know if, 'the atom-bombs are responsible for the drying up of clouds'. This reveals a peculiar aspect of Indian life, the remarkable co-existence of science and superstitions, knowledge and ignorance, mythology and weather-prediction. When cattle stop yielding milk and failed to drag the plough through the furrows, when sheep look scurvy and boney and when wells and earth dry up, the harmony of human relationships is acutely disturbed. "They quarreled over the water-hole priorities and there was fear, desperation and lamentation in their voice". In all these matters, their response is entirely Indian.

Raju, the inhuman monster and an ex-convict, is readily accepted by the villagers as a Swami. When he undertakes the fast they hail him as their savior. Their reaction to his fast is also typically Indian. In India, every event and situation, even the grimmest, is turned into an occasion for feasting and merry making. They give feasts to celebrate a death. As the fasting Raju is on the verge of death a large crowd gathers on the banks of the river, women, children and men, and they eat, drink and make merry. According to Indian belief if the custom, convention and traditional modes are violated, there is disorder and chaos. Any deviation from the traditional norms results in disorder, and order and normalcy are restored only when there is a return to the normal, which also the traditional.

In *The Guide* at least Raju accepts the traditional norms of India. He decides to undertake a fast to bring down the rain. It was not because he believes that it could cause rain fall, but it as a concession to popular belief, as an act of self-discipline and self-purification. This is an act of supreme self-sacrifice, in the noblest Hindu tradition. Social and individual morality as presented through the character of Raju in *The Guide*, by Narayan is note worthy. It is all a fine piece of satire on the innocence of the Indians. In short, *The Guide* is Indian both in theme and atmosphere. Even while using a western art-form Narayan remains an Indian to the core. In a fairly compact and concise manner the book conveys the numerous aspects the day-to-day lives of India. The different culture systems, the superstitions and the values of the people of a small town of South India, named Malgudi, actually located in the brain of



Narayan. Undoubtedly Malgudi serves as a reflection on Indian society in totality. This novel is praised by critics as a classic of all times which sustains interest with its many exciting and comic touches. Narayan's language in this novel is sharp, bright and compact. His language is transparent and crystal clear in establishing Indian life. It reflects the meaning intended by the author and prove to be a tale of modern India revealing depths beneath the Indian life.

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* Narayan's art reached its maturity. The novel has an implied moral. Nataraj and Vasu occupy the main roles in the novel, but behind them stand a number of minor characters. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* deals with physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages etc, of a particular locality of South Indian world Malgudi. In this novel Malgudi is shown to be a developing town like any Indian Town of those times. Nataraj, the central figure in the novel, is an 'un-heroic hero', a passive character. Nataraj is shrewd business man, a deeply religious man, a repository of the customs and traditions of Malgudi. He is pitted against Vasu, a taxidermist, a rootless intellectual and a figure we meet frequently in Narayan's novels. He is the Man-Eater in the novel while there is no man-eater in Malgudi in the literal sense. After Vasu's murder, every one suspects Nataraj. Then there are other characters that live in Malgudi. There are pariahs, teachers, clerks, printers, and police men etc, who live their routine life. Vasu, Nataraj, Rangi, Muthu etc, are all typically Malgudian, therefore Indian, despite their angularities and oddities.

Narayan has great regard for family ties and pieties of the home and family. Certain vernacular words as phaelwan, mahout, namaskaram, rakshasas etc Indian words occur in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Indian superstitions and religious beliefs and ceremonies etc are freely used to create the flavor of Indian life. However Narayan's Indianness in this novel is best seen in his use of Indian myths, legends and folklore in which Narayan is well-versed. Vasu is rakshasa, the evil incarnate, in the novel. He bullies men, but is terribly afraid of mosquitoes. *The Financial Expert* is an extremely well-constructed novel. The novel ends with Margayya taking to his old business once again. Despite all his skill in money-matters, Margayya is where he begun. Such is the story of the life and career, rise and fall of Margayya, the financial expert. Margayya, the hero of the novel represents universal greed and avarice. R.K.Narayan has given his entire philosophy of money through Margayya's character and actions which lead him nowhere. What makes *The Financial Expert* a work of art is the character of Margayya. Like Margayya all men are utterly helpless in the materialist world. Materialist civilization has a demoralizing effect on Indian social life. Margayya though not highly educated has a practical wisdom. It is every bodies experience in Indian context.

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As an Indian English writer he applies the simple theory of Indian life that light and shade go together as can be seen in the three novels taken up for study, *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. India and Indian experience remain the subject matter of all his writings. Narayan's novels can also be viewed as sketches with inherent comments on people and situations of India. The dialogues he used are simple and suggestive. Though he never preaches anything to the readers, his works are inspiring, making the readers reconsider their thoughts in certain aspects. He believes in simple living and high thinking of Indian people, and writes about the same. Narayan's brain child Malgudi has undergone a radical change in his thoughts and his novels depict the modernization of independent India. A great creation of Narayan, the Malgudi has exercised considerable influence on foreign writers and critics regarding Indian village life. His works are realistic pictures of Indian lives rather than a touch of imagination. In *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* the Indian life is predominant and his vision of Indian life creates his characters and their temperament. In short, the joys and sorrows of Indian men and women is the sole inspiration of all his works.

R.K.Narayan has a special method of characterization. He has drawn his characters with extraordinary delicacy and tenderness. He moves with his characters like Jane Austin, he looks at them frankly and turns them into interesting and amusing figures. He makes his characters to feel truly and think truly like any Indian. Margayya overcomes the shocks of life due to his common sense and spirit of practical wisdom. He serves in spite of his mean and selfish nature due to his courage to face the challenge of life. Narayan has used both analytical and dramatic methods in treating his characters. Most of Narayan's characters are firmly rooted in the Indian social customs and belief in the spirit of Hinduism. C.D.Narasimhaiah with a sarcastic sharpness tells, "A Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously." Moreover he is a traditionalist and does not give portraits of exceptional ones. He uses pure and simple English which is easy and natural.

Narayan's subjects and characters are susceptible to comic treatment and the inhabitants of Malgudi, although they may have their recognizable local trapping, are essentially human. Hence his characters have their kinship with all humanity. In this sense, Malgudi is everywhere. Narayan, the creator of Malgudi has put this particular region of South India on the World map. Many have taken the fictitious to be the real and have tried to identify the various geographical features and other land marks that constantly recur in his novels. But like Hardy's Wessex it is the pure country of the mind of the novelist. We see Malgudi grow from a small town into a large city. The recurrence of the same land marks serves to weld the various novels into organic whole. They may rightly be called Malgudi novels, just as Hardy's novels called Wessex novels. According to William Walsh, "Malgudi, the locale of all his novels, is symbol of India. Whatever happens in the one, happens in the other, and also

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the reader begins to believe whatever happens there happens everywhere.” Narayan is the creator of a whole picture-gallery of the immortals of Malgudi in his literary works. If once we have been acquainted with them, we can never forget them. The Indian family is the immediate context in which his sensibility operates and his novels are remarkable and delicacy and procession of the family relations. Narayan’s handling of family theme reveals his awareness and understanding of its different aspects. Its range, variety and complexity encompass the personal, emotional, social, economic, and cultural and other factors, which operate in the family. Iravathi Karve affirms, “In India the joint family has endured for as long as any records exist. Even about 1000BC in the time of Mahabharatha war, the joint family existed more or less as it exists today.”

In other words the setting in the characters is thoroughly realistic. His description of everyday scenes in the life of Malgudi, which is symbol of Indian, is also realistic. The dialogues among Narayan’s characters are also typical of every Indian life. They are half-comical, of serious quizzical situation, typically Indian that brings out beautifully their personalities at cross purposes with each other. All this is realism but it is fused with fantasy which is seen in his use of Indian myths, legends and folklore. Credibility is conferred on the incident of Vasu’s death by the mythological story demon Bhasmasura, who is lead to his doom by the strategy of dancer Mohini, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. A writer may use ancient myths consciously as a technique of narration. Narayan is well versed in Hindu epics, like Ramayana and Mahabharata and other Hindu scriptures and also in the myths and legends which form a part of the Indian folklore. This is clearly brought out by a study of his work entitled *Gods, Demons and Other stories* (1964). But it is only in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* that has consciously used myth as a technique in the manner of such modern English writers as T.S.Eliot, W.B.Yeats and many others.

R.K.Narayan has succeeded in driving home the moral that evil carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. His story is entertaining in Indian tone and has conveyed deep moral and religious truths of Hindu mythology which have perennial significance. However, Narayan’s morality is not obtrusive; it can be acquired only by the discerning reader who can read between the lines. Vasu is a Faustian character with his virtually insatiable curiosity and thirst for power and knowledge. He holds his master’s degree in History, Economics and Literature. Nataraj says about him, “The man’s curiosity was limitless and recognized no proprieties”. It proves Gandhiji’s saying education without character is mere waste. Nataraj, the weak, passive man hates Vasu, the strong active bully, but he is still drawn towards him. This complexity rarely is seen in Indian life.

Narayan has an easy flow of words speaks at a basic level and draws the attention of his readers. He has the force of typical Indian story-tellers’ because he draws upon the Indian



story-teller's resources, the epic tales and epic heroes, ancient Hindu mythology, religion and epics. He himself says at one place, "You can't write a novel without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, astrologers, pundits and devadasis". In Indian tradition, evil is expelled and normal ordered life becomes possible once again. This unobtrusive moral, does not come in the way of our enjoyment of the story. Suspense, humour and wit constantly enliven the narration and increase its entertainment value. William Walsh says, "Narayan's fiction makes explicit two of his deepest convictions about human life. In the first place his sense of the way in which, at very stage of his wife, the isolated individual faces the enormous fundamentally indifferent cloud. Streams of people flow round the single stone. This contest is present in many places in Narayan's work."

A regional novel is a novel which deals with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, language, etc., of a particular locality. However, this does not mean that regional art is mere factual reporting or photographic reproduction. Novelists like Narayan emphasize the unique features of a particular locality, its uniqueness, the various ways in which it differs from other localities. But as in all other art, we find in Narayan's fiction a constant selection and ordering of material. In other words through a proper selection and ordering of his material in the backdrop of Malgudi. Narayan stresses the distinctive spirit of this region and shows further that in its essentials it is the same everywhere. The differences are used as a means of revealing similarities; from the particular and the local and in this sense Narayan, the artist rises to the general and the universal. Malgudi, the selected region becomes a symbol of the world at large, a microcosm which reflects the great world beyond. Narayan is a regional novelist in this higher creative sense. P.K. Singh says, "Narayan has his own way effecting the social revolution and appears different from Mulk Raj Anand if he is known for his concern for common people."

Narayan's delicate blend of gentle irony and sympathy, quiet realism and fantasy stands poles. Narayan's little dramas are about middle class life are enacted in Malgudi. Narayan gives mirthful account in the life of the characters. Commenting on the life led by the middle class Indian, Narayan says:

Most Indians pray and meditate at least for a few minutes every day, and it may be one of the reasons why, with all our poverty and struggle, we still survive and are able to take a calm view of existence.

That's why he is the most widely appreciated Indian novelist in English. Narayan has an ease of narration as he had known and seen numerous facets of the rural and urban life of South India of those days. He is perhaps the most prolific writer among all the Indian writers in English. He had given a faithful account of man, and things as they have mirrored themselves



in his mind. The final result of Narayan's human touch in his works pure delight, happiness and peace. The merit of R.K.Narayan as well as his achievement lies in a transcendence which conceals itself in the deceptive simplicity and lightness.

This study reveals the journey of his characters from innocence to experience and then to wisdom. His characters are like caravans journeying through life's varied experiences. Diverse facets of human nature are presented in *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. In these novels Narayan treats not only individual's experiences, but also collective, social experiences. These novels tell not only the life story of Raju, Margayya, Nataraj, Vasu and other; it is the saga of vast Malgudi experience or the general human experience. Narayan fantastically portrays the diverse experiences of the average human beings, their existence, their dreams, anxieties, actions, frustrations and so on, a manner which enables the readers see things clearly as a detached observer of life.

Narayan is primarily pre-occupied with how a man leads his life entrusted to him in his traditional setting and in his social setup. The vital secret of Narayan's success as a novelist lies in his continuous concern for depicting "the subtle links between the old and the new personalities, the old and the new worlds." The Indianness in his characters lies in cherishing a heritage of faith and values, customs and traditions of the past. Narayan portrays Malgudi as a leading character in his novels and that he "invests it with a life and shows its reactions upon the lives of other characters." The present study has shown us that temporal changes have come over Malgudi, but the eternal spirit of India has withstood all such changes. Mr. Gupta says, "Narayan's novels deal mostly with people not quite in and not out of society. Characters, who, verse on the eccentric and not entirely at home. In the traditional world, any way these are always convincing and somehow endearing." Modernization and modernized characters in these novels are targets of irony of Narayan and his characters discard their jaundiced views and realize the reality of things. Through frequent rise and fall, they move until their experiences culminate into wisdom. After many adventures and miss-adventures in life the characters return to the all-pervasive reality of Malgudi sadder and saner. And through their journey Narayan observes the vast spectrum of Indian life. As Paul Verghese points out, "Narayan points a delicate balance of power in human relations. He does not, however, sit in judgement or call the rightness or wrongness of the character's action."

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