



R.K.NARAYAN'S NOVEL: A REPLICIA OF INDIAN VALUES

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ABSTRACT

R.K.Narayan is the grand old man of Indian – English literature .His works have established him as the most popular of the three founding pillars of Indian novelists in English along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao . He is the most prolific living Indo-Anglian writer who has the rare distinction of being the author of fourteen novels , about a hundred stories ,prose versions of the Indian epics – The Ramayan and The Mahabharat and five books of non- fiction. Among all Indian writers he has the longest literary career of being devoted to pure art for almost six decades. Significantly enough, during all these years he has not changed his outlook and has consistently believed that writing is an end in itself and not a means to communicate other kinds of truth. Along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao he begins writing at a period when colonialism is on its exit and the nation is in a traditional stage of faith and doubt. Inspired by the new changes and aspirations these writers were in search of a new idiom. However, in their response to the new millennium each one has his individual approach in agreement with his own conception of the world and ethical standard. Inspite the fact that they belong to a particular phase of history each of them has his own theme.

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As regards Narayan, for him neither the philosophies nor the social evils are a theme to be dealt with unlike Anand's tragic comic and Raja Rao's religio comic , his approach to novel is serio comic. He is preliminarily concerned with the common day - to -day events of life. It does not mean that his protagonists are oblivious of the social and political changes .They are infact, aware of these facts but

they do not commit themselves to any ideology, nor do they prepare themselves for any class war. They are imbued with a social awareness and a sense of responsibility. To that extent they are capable of exhibiting human qualities. Narayan finds pleasure in their common hopes and aspirations. For him they represent a normal course of life which does not involve any sense of waste and void felt in a Shakespearean tragic – world nor the utter helplessness suffered by the characters of Ibsen nor the pathos of Hardy. An amusing sense of life prevails upon Malgudi. It is this aspect that appeals him most and he celebrates it. Possibly he is the lone Indo – Anglian novelist to be concerned with life as it is. He is essentially a writer of middle class characters of Malgudi, a place of his imagination in South India. He has given a wide gallery of both male and female characters in his writings.

Characters or what E.M.Forster calls “people” form the most essential aspect of the novel. People react and respond to the actions of other people, or to the situations in their lives. In R.K.Narayan’s novel’s characters are clearly more important than the situations. His novels make a delectable study of characters.

“Like Fielding, Dicken and many other illustrations novelists, Narayan is deeply interested in character portrayal. A character in a situation is to him, as to Joyce Cary, the central and starting point in a fictional work. Naturally, in reply to the question: “Which hold the primary place in his composition situation or character?” he spontaneously remarked: “Character in situation”¹.

The delineation of women in his novel has been one of the unfailing considerations of Narayan. His novels from Swami and Friends to the World of Nagraj, present a great portrait – gallery of women. Though all the female characters belong to the same imaginary place Malgudi, they are much different from one another. All these women are different individuals with different merit and demerit of character. Thus Narayan has successfully presented the whole milieu of the Indian society and has given a rich, opulent plethora of women.

Britta Olinder writes about his female characters:

“They fall into three main groups: first Domineering powerful women; second, powerless, frustrated, oppressed women; and third women accepting the system – in this case, the Indian society of strong masculine dominance – but at the same time finding ways and means to informal, indirect control of their situations.”²

Narayan’s chief concern is the middle class people he is intimately familiar with. The characters are invariably common men and women with a marked potential for the uncommon trying to win attention for themselves. The most of his characters that we come across in the Malgudi – circle are innocent at large struggling against an unsympathetic environment. They are traditional and superstitious. They believe that everything on earth is preordained and that no amount of human efforts can ease the situation he protagonists (mostly female characters) of his novels do not control the events but the events control them. They are helpless creatures torn by desires and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. Malthi, “The Bachelor of Arts”, who is very deeply loved by Chandran, cannot marry him because their horoscopes do not tally together. Savitri (The Dark Room), Shanti (Mr. Sampath), Susila (The English Teacher) etc. have all become subject to the cruelties of fate. Rajiv Tarant righty observes:

“From average to the extraordinary
And back back again to a more
poignant state of average seems
to be the recurrent movement in terms
of interacting characters in the majority
of Narayan’s novels.”³

“In The Dark Room” the movement from normal to the abnormal and back to normal is seen both in Ramani and his wife Savitri. In the novel of R.K.Narayan there is generally a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration of normalcy. Savitri, Swami,

Chandran and Bharti (Waiting for the Mahatma) all run away but later come back in Malgudi which is an obvious indicative of Indian value. Even Susila herself the wife of the English teacher, defying death (if at all one believes) is with Krishna, and this indicates that a traditional Indian lady very strongly believes in Indian value. As Dr. Badal observes:

“Narayan’s characters are typically Malgudians rooted in the age old Local traditions. His characters belong to Malgudi. They do not play their parts, but live, move in and out, talk and laugh, and then disappear only to appear again and again in the familiar sights.”⁴

It is generally seen that the traditional religious values and the modern approach cannot go hand in hand. Hindus are deeply traditional, and the onslaught of science and scientific advancement have confused the major female and male characters of Narayan’s novels considerably. They are reluctant to forego their age-old beliefs and established social values however, harmful they are for the proper growth of their individuality. It so happens because their minds are trained to accept puranic stories right from childhood. In such a social setup with new values and new approaches clapping all around, many of them find themselves in a dilemma. Unable to get along with the old values, they develop rebellious attitude and try to assert their individuality. Savitri’s high caste (The Dark Room) creates a deeply psychological barrier between herself and Mari and Ponni of the lower caste who rescue her from drowning. She too in her attempt to assert her individuality leaves her husband, though in the end she has no other alternative left but to accept defeat in life. She returns to her home to her unrepentant husband.

It would not be improper here to make mention of Chandran (The Bachelor of Arts) who also renounces the earthly world out of sheer reluctance to its irrational and ridiculous nature of social customs, but finally returns to his family marries in the same old traditional way and settles down in life. Bullying husbands like Kamani and weak wives like Savitri (The Dark Room) are a common feature of our traditional society. Woman is a helpless creature to be guarded by her father as a child, by her husband in her youth, and by her son when she is old and a widow, and this state suits properly to the Indian setup and value. Quite contrary to this Bharati an important female character in "Waiting for the Mahatma" inspires Sriram, the main character of the novel to join the freedom movement and become the disciple of Gandhi. It is only due to his love for Bharati that he becomes the disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and gets disrupted in the normalcy of his life which he is leading in the sweet and contented company of his grandmother. In other way, this inspiration of Bharati to Sriram is also an indicative of the attitude of the female character like Bharati following the Indian value.

Also at the same time it seems proper to mention that the relationship of Daisy and Raman in "The Painter of Signs" is the reminiscent of the Goddess Ganga and the king Santhanu and in this way it repents very truly an ancient Indian value. The child in "Swami and Friends" is grown into a youth in "The Bachelor of Arts". The mythic outlook of the artist too gains an extension as the narrative in the second novel dealing with the unsuccessful love between Chandran (a name normally given after the Moon God - Chandra) and Malathi echoes the unfruitful love between Chandra and Tara of the Indian mythology. In the said myth Chandra leads a married life with Tara - the wife of Brihaspati who happens to be the 'guru' of the former. The love of the two cannot be consummated partly because of the curse given by Brihaspati and partly because it has no social sanction as generally happens according to Indian value. Keeping this view in mind it is seen that any love based on infatuation violating social ethics is always short-lived, and the same situation is depicted in "The Bachelor of Arts" between Malathi and Chandran. Chandran is a modern version of Moon God with a slight difference. He desires to have a love marriage which is not acceptable to the people of Malgudi. Though the Moon God enjoys at least some days with Tara, Chandran cannot marry at all. The latter simply lives in a world of dream and excitement reconstructing Malathi's age, status and name. "He wondered next what her name might be. She looked like one with the name of Lakshmi, quite a beautiful name, the name of Goddess of wealth, the spouse of God Vishnu, who was the protector of creatures."⁵

As the marriage cannot take place he totally forgets her and is contented with his new wife Susila. He has no physical suffering which the Moon God undergoes. In the next novel, "The Dark Room" the major characters Savitri and Ramani are not the juvenile ones. Narayan, therefore uses a suitable myth befitting to their status. It symbolises the motive of a wife to assert the marital status inspite of being disowned by her husband. In the myth Dushyanta fails to recognise Shakuntala, but she claims her right to live and die in a forest keeping her emotionally inclined to her husband. After a period she is united to him. In "The Dark Room" there is faint echo of the said myth - the main character, Ramani, of course, unlike Dushyanta does not desert his wife, Savitri who follows indian values, Ramani disowns her emotionally and out of frustration she tries to commit suicide in a river. She is saved by lock-smith who arranges her accommodation at a temple. But this is for a few days as she returns back to her husband realizing that devoid of home and family her existence has no meaning and compromises the situation:

"I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it"⁶

To conclude it can be said that R.K.Narayan has depicted Indian society authentically in his novels. The Indian society is presented vividly with all its traditions, rituals, superstitions and dogmas which the characters are scrupulously following. His world view is based on the heritage of the past. In this way it will be right to say that his novels are replica of indian values.

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