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RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN R. K. NARAYAN'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan is one of the impeccable milestones in the journey of Indian English Literature. Among his contemporaries, he finds unique position and produces miscellaneous works which remain popular and appreciated widely across the world. R. K. Narayan was thoroughly different in comparison with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao in the context of their writings. Mulk Raj Anand stands himself as a social reformer and champion of underdog while Raja Rao generally known for his metaphysical strain in his works but Narayan simply remains novelist in his works. His novels are the unique combination of western techniques and Eastern resources and he remains successful in presenting Indian ambiance in English language. For his marvelous novels and short stories, he stands with Raja Rao and Anand in the literary trio of Indian novelists writings by the critics. Besides he remains succeeded to hold his position as a professional author in his whole career. No one can categorize his works as abundant or echoes of the author's serenity and such things place him among the chief story tellers of modern Indian English. His works show his deep understanding and knowledge of the Indian middle class society where his notable middle class characters are left marked on readers strongly. Besides the characters from upper and lower class society portrayed perfectly by him but they find seldom place in his writings.

Keywords: Narayan, cultural, social, spiritual elements, Indianess, Malgudi and Indian literature.

Introduction

One of the pertinent characteristics that make Narayan's works splendid and marvelous is his imagined fictitious town Malgudi which is used for his series of novels. R. K. Narayan perfectly discusses the social absurdities of the society which he tries to solve through the intelligent persona in his novels. It is true that his characters in any novel remain the mouthpiece of writer and they express what the

writer intended to say in the novels to his readers. It is the writer who creates the situation in which his characters reacts accordingly. Hence the characters remain the spokesperson of the writer in any writings. Their ideas, attitudes and actions reflect an author's perception towards life. K. Iyenger eulogizes R. K. Narayan, he says: "He is the rare thing in India today, a man of letters prime and simple, (Iyenger)." R.K. Narayan is not exceptional writer in

the context of characters portrayal in his novels. Like many writers, he also expresses his own outlook, attitudes and ideas towards the society, beliefs, social and political situation of the country by his characters. Narayan's protagonist and other persona reflects what he wishes to express and they represent writer's spirits, feelings and ideas. One of the major things in his novel is the portrayal of inner conflict of the characters life. Though Narayan doesn't embody himself a preacher in his novel and the central problem in his novels remain the difficulty to live a meaningful life. Generally we find problems in the patriarchal families in his works. Besides he wrote on other subjects such as love, marriage, cultural disparity, problems of marriage etcetera. In his stories we find marriage relationship monotonous and loveless. The characters imbibed much knowledge and reflect varied experience of life both pleasant and gloomy. They exemplify common people of the society and also present their silly humorous faults and drawbacks. One of the critic comments Narayan's portrayal of country cultural and social life infused with humor and tragedy, he says:

He is a master of comedy who is not unaware of the tragedy of the human situation; he is neither an intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes nor their fanatic defender; he is on the whole, content to snap Malgudi life's little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance, and tragic-comedies of mischance and misdirection. (Iyengar)

Narayan also uses to give common message for society that life is nothing without problems and the struggle or success is the part of life. For Narayan's protagonists life is a mixture of tragicomedy and every human confronts difficulties in their life. Thus, such kind of realistic things are reflected by his characters in his works. The invention of Malgudi town makes him stand with English writers like Hardy and Faulkner. This town perfectly shows writer's objectives of life, values, norms, rituals and other aspects which exist realistically and will remain continue in the Indian society. Besides Narayan characters reflects western attitudes and culture which could also be seen in the Indian society as well. One of the critic comments;

"Narayan does assert the validity of traditional Indian values but the wind from the west has changed much of the panorama, (Mathur, 2)." The exploration of local culture in his novels is a striking feature. In his novels, he strongly instilled mythical stories and numerous references of culture to make them more comprehensible his own readers because, as Narayan believes that, most of them remain familiar from these fairy tales from early childhood period. He brings forth his own country culture for the worldly readers and because of such distinct elements his works labeled sometimes part of sociolinguistics. If we go through his major novels it is found that he maintains a perfect balance in Hinduism or Indian traditional life and in western culture. From the novel titled *Swami and Friends* to *The Dark Room*, Narayan remain indebted to western modes though he was inclined towards Hinduism and tradition while choosing his themes and characters. An English critic, Patrick Sweden, states in his peculiar essay on Narayan's works named Gods, Demons and others in the Novels of R.K. Narayan, he says "Narayan is indebted to both western and Indian narrative traditions, later the critic added that "the author's early novels from *Swami and Friends* to *the Dark Room* are heavily indebted to western models, (Patrick)." His novels are strongly concerned with Hinduism, Philosophy and other conventional elements which present the societal pictures of the country people. He presents these things through his characters, their beliefs and lifestyle. The novel "The Sweet Vendor" depicts the evolution of characters with different aspects and the themes such as domestic life, Gandhism, father son relationship and their beliefs and approaches of life and the people greediness and lastly their repentance and renunciation. All the things in the novel are presented with the mixture tension and humor. Jagan, the protagonist and sweet vendor in the novel is presented a follower of Gandhian and Gita philosophy. His character exhibits simplicity and mediocrity. In the opening of the novel he is presented as a greedy businessman and the one who recites Gita but his realization of the things in the last section of the novel turned him into a religious man who joined religious road to get salvation from the worldly desires. Narayan derives Hinduism principles

and its practices in his writings from different religious sources such the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Puranas, the Gita and other great epics. His novels and characters are depicted as the fusion of worldly life and religious ideologies. His popular essay titled "*The world of story tells*" is a great instance of traditional and modern ideas and art. His fictions deeply show both Hindu traditions and modern philosophy as well. The choice of religious materials suggests his vision. We find many persona which carried out from the Hindu religious texts such as Narad and Raavan in his essay *God, Demons and Others* are derived from Ramayana. However, he uses name of numerous Hindu god and goddess and among them, Goddess Laxmi remains frequent part of his novels. Goddess Laxmi is regarded the symbol of Love, beauty and prosperity in Indian society especially for the Hindus. We can find her reference in many of his novels. In the novel "The Bachelor of Arts" she is presented as the deity of love and beauty. Chandran, the protagonist of the novel and his meeting with Malathi and his sudden infatuation with her beauty has created imaginative world around him in which he continuously glorify her beauty and sensuousness. He doesn't care about his marital status nor ask her name. He started to think about her in an impulsive manner without knowing single about her:

He imagines her name as Lakshmi because he cannot give a lesser name to such a paragon of beauty; 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 Creature." (p.56)

In another novel *The Painter of Signs*, we find Raman aunts name Laxmi and children also bear the name of Gods and Goddesses as well to get their qualities in their life. Narayan's also uses god and goddess name in his novels form expanding its plots narrative and they also carries narrative till the end of the novel. There are various instances Lakshmi appear as a Goddess in *The Financial Expert*, Lord Krishna in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, Shiva and Parvathi in *Mr. Sampath* and Narad in *The World of Nagaraj*. Furthermore, we find in the villages

particular deity of the villagers which was also portrayed by Narayan in his novel meticulously. In the novel "*The Financial Expert*" we come to know that the protagonist, Margayya, was advised by the village priest that he should appease Goddess Laxmi to attain wealth. Margayya follows his advice and begin Jaap of mantras in every morning till forty days. The description of his religious activities describes beautifully by the writer:

Margayya drew up several pots of water from the well and splashed the water about. He then commanded his wife to decorate the floor with white flower designs, a decoration necessary for all auspicious occasions. He had a string of mango leaves tied across the doorway. He took from the nail in the hall the picture of Goddess Lakshmi, put up a short pedestal and placed the picture on it: the four armed Goddess, who presides over wealth, distinction, bravery and enterprise, and all the good things in life. (pp. 46-47)

In the conclusion, he asserts that the analytical discussion of R.K. Narayan's major novels convey the supremacy of Indian culture in his writings. Narayan's mastery over local spiritual, cultural and social aspects shows his massive knowledge of Indian mythology and religious things which remain the immense source of his works. In his novels he sketches an ideal society and its people that is saturated by karma, reawakening and wandering. Besides Narayan deliver for his readers a sense of traditional life, spiritual ambiance and a life of sacred and ethical beliefs. English writer and critic William Walsh glorify his uses of mythological and local culture in his novels; "The religions 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 ordaining human the feeling and experience, (Walsh, 4)."

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