



Contribution of R. K. Narayan to the World of Indian English Novel

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Keywords :

INTRODUCTION.



Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan-swami Iyer or R.K.Narayan is considered to be one of the founding fathers of Indian English Novel along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. The first Indian English Novel was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1904 (*Rajmohan's Wife*), not much significant development took place for some time in this genre, the output consisted of

historical or romantic novels, the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene shifted the focus of fiction to his works and thinking, but it was actually in the period of 1930-1970 when writers like Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh and Nirad.C.Chaudhari and many others arrived, and tried their hands at various themes and evolution in this field began. The current group consists of writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, V.S.Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi and many others, their themes and styles are experimental and have earned them name and fame.

This paper is about R.K.Narayan and his contribution to Indian English novel (IEN) so I will discuss here, his life and works, sense and style of writing, comparison with immediate contemporaries, relevance of his work in today's world and his impressions on his readers.

LIFE AND WORKS.

"There are writers- Tolstoy and Henry James to name two-whom we held in awe, writers- Turgenev and Chekhov- for whom we feel a personal affection, other writers whom we respect- Conrad for example- but who hold us at a long arm's length with their 'courtly foreign grace.' Narayan (whom I don't hesitate to name in such a context) more than any of them wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian."² These words by Graham Greene give us significant idea about Narayan's work, he wrote on the simplest of subjects, about day to day life yet he makes it so interesting that we are held in his fictional world and impressions remain long in our head. Graham Greene, an English author and critic was responsible for publishing R.K.Narayan's first few novels. He was his mentor and friend and this friendship continued life long, he also gets credit for shortening Narayan's name and making it reader friendly.

Narayan was born on 10th October 1906 at Chennai. His family consisted of his parents and five siblings along with him. Narayan spent initial years of his life with his grandmother and these years left a lasting impression on him. In his *Memoir (My Days)* he gives a beautiful description of his early life. "When we passed an orange coloured school building with

a green gate, my uncle promised that I would in due course find myself there. I did not welcome the idea. It was a gaunt looking building with a crucifix on its roof, and I hated it at first sight."³ He was an avid observer of life around him, loved his pets, and enjoyed playing and hated school and studies. He has beautifully pictured his childhood memories in his first novel *Swami and Friends* published in the year 1935, Swami, the protagonist in the novel is a small child and we see the world through his eyes, while reading the novel it seems as we have revisited our childhood years. Narayan after college tried his hands at many things but writing suited him the best and against the wishes of his family he decided to take writing full time. Following lines from his *Memoir* show the discontentment of his family, "My father occasionally enamored of me, 'what are you attempting on that road roller?' (My type-writer). He gently suggested that 'I should not waste time.'"⁴

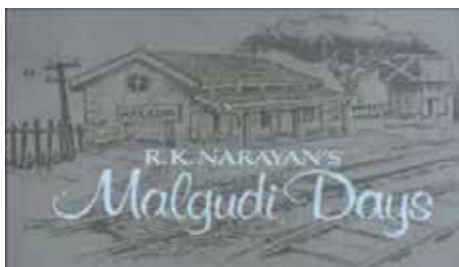


Initial years of his career were full of struggle, nobody in India could understand his writing genius, he was making ends meet by writing small time in magazines and newspapers. His first break was given by Graham Greene who was shown the manuscript of his novel by an old friend of Narayan, 'Purna'. Thus began his career as a novelist. His next novel was *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) which is of semi autobiographical content, the third in line was *The Dark Room* (1938), Narayan is known for his light heartedness and comic writing but this novel was an exception as it depicted the plight of an Indian woman who has to resign to her circumstances, it is depressing but a very realistic novel. Narayan was unconventional in his thinking and satirized the old age superstitions and evils in society in his novels and short stories; he has in detail described their irrelevance and damage towards life. He had a love marriage in 1934 and enjoyed his marital life, till destiny played its evil game and Rajam, his wife died in 1939. This shattered him and he stopped writing and started living life

like in a cocoon, his only focus being the upbringing of his daughter. But a spiritual experience changed his attitude towards life and then his pen never stopped but just kept giving us pearls of wisdom till he was alive. *The English Teacher* (1945), is a very special novel, about it he says, "*The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction. *The English Teacher* of the novel, Krishna, is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child is Leela instead of Hema."⁶

In his lifetime he has given us a number of novels, short stories, and non fictional work. His novels include *Swami and Friends* (1935, Hamish Hamilton), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937, Thomas Nelson), *The Dark Room* (1938, Eyre), *The English Teacher* (1945, Eyre), *Mr. Sampath* (1948, Eyre), *The Financial Expert* (1952, Methuen), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955, Methuen), *The Guide* (1958, Methuen), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961, Viking), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967, The Bodley Head), *The Painter of Signs* (1977, Heinemann), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983, Heinemann), *Talkative Man* (1986, Heinemann), *The World of Nagaraj* (1990, Heinemann), *Grandmother's Tale* (1992, Indian Thought Publications); non-fiction- *Next Sunday* (1960, Indian Thought Publications), *My Dateless Diary* (1960, Indian Thought Publications), *My Days* (1974, Viking), *Reluctant Guru* (1974, Orient Paperbacks), *The Emerald Route* (1980, Indian Thought Publications), *A Writer's Nightmare* (1988, Penguin Books); *Mythology-Gods, Demons and Others* (1964, Viking), *The Ramayana* (1973, Chatto & Windus), *The Mahabharata* (1978, Heinemann), *Short story collections-Malgudi Days* (1942, Indian Thought Publications), *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947, Indian Thought Publications), *Lawley Road and Other Stories* (1956, Indian Thought Publications), *A Horse and Two Goats* (1970), *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985), *The Grandmother's Tale and Selected Stories* (1994, Viking).

Narayan managed a decent writing career, was able to buy property, take care of his family and daughter and roam around the world, carry on with his interests and above all write. "*The Guide* won him the Sahitya Academy Award in 1960. He was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1964. University of Leeds conferred on him Honor of D.Litt in 1967, Delhi University followed it in 1973. He was a visiting lecturer at Michigan State university in 1958 and lectured at many reputed institutions of America, such as University of California, Kansas University, Yale University and Yassar College. Many of his stories have been broadcasted by B.B.C. *Malgudi Days* a tele-serial was made on his short stories. He won the A.C.Benson medal by Royal Society of Literature in 1980. He was made the Honorary member of American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982. During 1986-1991, was nominated Member of Rajya Sabha. He was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan in 2000."⁷ Narayan died on 13th may 2001, leaving behind a treasure of knowledge.



STYLE AND SENSE OF WRITING.

R.K.Narayan was a voracious reader and a sharp observer, he could mimic life brilliantly and his characters remind us of people and life around us. He gives us what we know but from a detached point of view, he satirizes our superstitions and social evils, empathizes with the plight of women, and gives a peek into British India, shows us the simplicity and culture and traditions of rural and small town India, very beautifully

depicts our moral values, religious beliefs and relationships, in a way, he gives us an observation of Indian way of life. He has created a world of his own which comes to life as we open any of his work, the art of detailing and the character portrayal make it very real.

His most beautiful creation is the imaginary town of Malgudi, it is like any small town in South India with beautiful landscape, simple people, some recognizable buildings and life of people there is intertwined with each other, they enjoy sitting under trees and discussing about each other's life, womenfolk like celebrating their rituals together and children like playing in natural environs. Everyone knows everybody else; any new entrant is easily recognizable. Malgudi shows growth and development with time, British bring their impressions to it and the new India brings its own symbols to it. Malgudi is the setting of most of his novels and though he made it world famous as a synonym with small town life of India but actually it is nowhere to be found on the map of India. In his own words, "I really can't explain its (Malgudi) persistence, you know. Because it was just a casual idea. It's not a fixation, a fixed geography. It has grown, developed. I think it has very elastic borders, elastic frontiers, elastic everything – with a few fixed points, that's all.... Instead of listening to a temple piper, people probably have a transistor radio. And then, instead of a transistor they may have a three-in-one recorder and play cassettes. You can watch villagers playing cassettes in the fields nowadays. But people have not changed. Human types have remained the same. So they remain my characters. At least in Malgudi there can't be."⁹

Narayan has been unusual with his style, while as others were busy writing about Indian freedom struggle and Gandhi, Narayan was busy revealing the secrets of common man's life, in his own style and language, for him English was a way of expressing, he never tried to emulate his western idols but wrote and created form of his own, his English was Indian in feel and appeal. Though initially he was criticized for his choice of subjects and simplicity of writing but later it was this sense and trademark style of writing that made him an icon. "For anyone, like Greene, seeking to understand India, R.K. Narayan is more accessible than Salman Rushdie and less cumbersome than Vikram Seth. In 15 novels and numerous short stories written in a spare style, and rarely more than 200 pages long, he illuminates the lives of small-town people. Gradually the reader comes to view the world through Indian rather than western eyes."¹⁰

R.K.Narayan was a master of characterization. His creations have become immortal. Swami, one of the earliest of his characters is the best of the lot. This small boy has a world of his own, he wants to eat, play, sleep and enjoy in the safe confines of his home, for him this means the world, he belongs to a typical South Indian Brahmin family, the description of his home, family and the town Malgudi (first introduction to this imaginary town) give us a feel of South India. Swami is like any of us in our childhood, full of mischief and curiosity, his friends, adventures and outlook towards life is described in the brand Narayan style. A few lines from the novel – "It was a perfect Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire eyed Vedangayagam, his class teacher; the headmaster with his thin long cane..."¹¹

The characters from his pen kept growing over the years and became memorable, they could be anyone from a doting mother, to a college student, a school boy, married man, a tortured wife, an unhappy son, a sad father or our very own village postman; all of them had their own peculiarities and characteristics, beautifully sketched and inspired from life. For eg- Chandan from *The Bachelor of Arts* is like any representative youth of his times, influenced by western thinking. He is a good student and wants to live life on his own terms,

falls in love faces rejection from society, becomes an ascetic and at last comes back to normal Indian family life, we don't hate or love him but just empathize as he is like any of us rebel at heart but a firm believer of Indian family values. Raju, from *The Guide* is the journey of a common man from commonness to esoteric levels, he is like a landmark character in Narayan creations, and the growth of this character is brilliant. Some of his women characters are avant-garde and symbol of the changing trends in our country, Savitri from *The Dark Room* doesn't take unfaithfulness from her husband easily, and Rosie from *The Guide* breaks her marriage and lives life on her own terms. Though most of his women characters imbibe the loving, caring and sacrificing characteristics but they give an impression of not to be taken granted and given a space of their own. Some of his characters like Margayya (*The Financial Expert*) and Talkative Man show the universality of his characters. R.K.Narayan is a common man's writer, his works are loved alike by young, old and children .His works have a worldwide appeal.

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COMPARISON WITH CONTEMPORARIES.

English entered India as a foreign language but slowly and steadily has become a part of us and today much of our communication happens to be in this medium. Indian English Literature had a humble beginning, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo gave it the initial impetus. After prose and poetry, the Great Indian English Novel made its beginning with Rajmohan's Wife (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee). The output consisted of romantic novels, historical novels or works inspired by Gandhian movement for some time, it was somewhere in the 1930's -1950's that the actual development in this field happened, writers experimented with diverse themes, Mulk Raj Anand was busy with his social novels, Raja Rao had a spiritual bent of mind, R.K.Narayan was busy weaving the common man's world, these three erupted as the giants of this genre, there were others who wrote on politics, imperialism, caste system, Indian culture and traditions, middle class India, western influences and hypocrisy. Some of them include Khushwant Singh, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Manohar Malgaonkar and Nirad.C.Chaudhari. Here we will mainly discuss R.K.Narayan and his immediate contemporaries Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Anand was an ardent supporter of poor and downtrodden, he felt for them and wanted the society to recognize and uplift them. He showed us the world through their eyes. Some of his novels with the same theme are *The Untouchables*, *Coolie*, *Two leaves* and *a Bud* and *The Village*. *Untouchable* (1935) was his first novel and a phenomenal success. The life of a scavenger, his problems, the attitude of society towards him, the evil caste system, his helplessness and besides this volatile atmosphere, a kind of hope he had for his dreams and better life. The writer shows us India, with its social deformities and seeks respect for the poor and helpless, after so many years the book is still relevant to our society. Anand, through his writing wanted to bring a change in the society, humanity was the highest practice for him. Mahatma Gandhi and Indian freedom struggle had a great influence on him. Anand had a unique style of writing English in which he used Punjabi and Hindustani

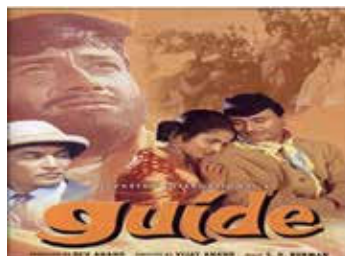
idioms. Along with Munshi Premchand (1880-1936), Anand was responsible for forming Dalit literature of India. He became a part of the Indian National Congress and joined the freedom struggle.

Raja Rao started his career with *Kanthapura*. It is the story of a south Indian village during freedom struggle and the influence of Gandhi phenomenon on the village people. The story is being narrated by an old woman in a typical Indian style which is racy, spontaneous and poetic.

Rao was influenced by Gandhism and wrote about it again in the short story collection *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947). In 1998 he published Gandhi's biography *Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. He has written only five novels *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, *Comrade Kirillov* and *The Chessmaster and His Moves*. His works are deeply influenced by Hindu tradition and spiritualism. *The Serpent and The Rope* won him Sahitya Academy Award in 1964. This novel illustrates the conflicts between east and west, it is the story of Ramaswamy, his psychological introspection and his journey towards spiritual evolution. He is a young Brahmin studying in France who marries a French college teacher, while he is managing his family commitments and life with his partner; she decides to renounce the world. *Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) is a metaphysical comedy where the Hindu notion of Karma is discussed. *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) satirizes communism, *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988) is about people seeking their identities.

Mulk Raj Anand ,Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan are contemporaries but their style of writing and subjects are contrasting, while as Mulk Raj Anand was a social reformist writer who tried to bring the dark sides of society to forefront and questioned them, Raja Rao was a philosopher, he wrote about the Indian Mysticism, his perspectives in writing were spiritually bent. R.K.Narayan was the lightest in his approach; he was an observer of life and portrayed it through his characters and their day to day life with a sense of detachment.

READERS IMPRESSION.



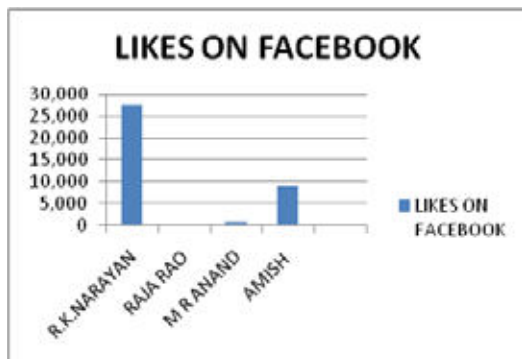
Social networking is a way of connecting with each other people thousands of miles away or even complete strangers can discuss about issues or people they strongly feel about. On one such site, I compared the popularity of R.K.Narayan with his immediate contemporaries and current sensation in Indian literature, the result shows that even after so many years his works are liked and read by people. Though the results can vary, and this method is not up to the mark but it gives us fair idea about the immortality of Narayan's works. His subjects and characters are universal and this appeal has carried over years and continues because time and technology can change but basic human nature remains the same and that is what Narayan captures the best.

He is one of the most loved writers by children. We find many of his stories in schoolbooks .*The Missing Mail* and *Swami's* adventures are some of them. The tele-series 'Malgudi Days' was a favourite with us during our childhood and even today kids watch repeat telecasts or youtube versions. Its title song is a rage with kids. His popularity has surpassed many of his contemporaries because of his simple language and worldwide appeal of plot and characters.

People who don't understand literature love reading his works, he has brought this genre close to the common man. *The Guide* by him is considered to be a cult book; the story was so loved and admired by the intelligentsia that it inspired the famous Chetan Anand movie 'Guide' starring Dev Anand and Waheeda Rahman, the movie too has reached legend status. His works have stood the test of time and still appeal to the readers; his works have kept his thinking alive even after so many years of his demise.

CONCLUSION.

This write up summarizes the contribution of R.K.Narayan to the genre of IEN. He continues to rule over the heart of his readers. Simple yet extraordinary, that has been the appeal of his works. India and its small town life have been his plots, his character sketches are universal. Children love his works and peculiar characters; truly he is a common man's writer. In the words of Hillary Spurling, "A treat...he is an enchanter."¹⁴



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