



The Study of Indianness in R.K. Narayan's Short Stories

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Abstract :

The short stories of R.K. Narayan highlight the struggle of common masses staying in Malgudi, an imaginary town in India. The stories are very inspiring and Narayan gives us a valuable lesson of life in a humorous way. The characters in his stories are taken from everyday life. They are servant, blind beggar, accountant, watchman, food stall owner, talkative man, Swami and other bunch of characters. The struggle of the characters with their lots and the difficulties they have to confront are well portrayed in his stories. This paper aims at annotating the concept of Indianness in the short stories of R.K. Narayan.

Keywords : indianness, common people, society

Introduction :

RashipuramKrisnaswamiIyerNarayana Swami (popularly known as R. K. Narayan) is widely regarded as the greatest Indian writer in English of the 20th century. He is the contemporary of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. He is a master story teller and his literary canvas teems with common people of all time and places. He takes immense pain in bringing Indian literature to the rest of the world.

R. K. Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras (Chennai). He was the third child of Rasipuram VenkataramaKrisnaswamiIyer. His father was a head master in a school. Narayan was taken care by his maternal grandmother, Parvati as his mother became ill after his birth. He spent a part of his childhood with her. Parvati gave Narayan the nickname of Kunjappa and in the whole family he was known by this name. He learned Classical Indian Music, Sanskrit, Mythology and Arithmetic from his grandmother. Narayan studied at different schools in Madras, including the Lutheran Mission School in Purasawalkam, Christian College High School, and C. R. C. High School. He was a voracious reader.

The first published work of R.K. Narayan was a book review of Development of Maritime Laws of 17th Century England. The thought of seeing his own words in print for the first time delighted Narayan. Later, he started writing stories for newspaper and magazines. A Night of Cyclone is the first short story written by R. K. Narayan. He continued to write short stories till the end of his career. He loved to write short stories. Out of fascination, he started his career as a short story writer.

Indianness in Narayan's Writing

Malgudi Days is Narayan's first collection of short stories. It was published in November 1943. As Narayan got cut off from England due to the war, he started his own publishing company naming it Indian Thought Publications. This publishing company was a successful one and is still active.

R. K. Narayan is a remarkable writer known for his unpretentious down-to-earth style. In his writing, there is a unique flavour which touches the heart of the readers.

R. K. Narayan is one of the most delicate, sensitive and capable novelists of India. His writing style is very simple. There is a natural element of humour about it. The setting in his stories is a realistic one. In his stories, he portrays the everyday happenings of Indian society. His characters are drawn from all the classes of society. R. K. Narayan particularly deals with the middle class which he knows very intimately. He never attempts to present Indian in an exotic light for the sake of foreign readers. Many critics have considered Narayan to be the Indian Chekhov, due to the similarities in their writings, the simplicity and the gentle beauty and humour in tragic situations. Graham Greene considered Narayan to be more similar to Chekhov than any Indian writers.

The characters of R. K. Narayan are wonderful. They have a peculiar innocence. In treating his subject-matter, Narayan is very objective. His use of English Language is very clean and vivid. The feelings of the South Indian town, Malgudi, are portrayed by his characters and themes. Narayan's language is remarkable for its economy of expression. It is easy, graceful, and straightforward. In it, there is no obscure word or phrase. In his works, the underlying irony is also gentle and smooth. In order to laugh at the laughable foibles of human nature, he blends satire with humour.

Apart from humour and irony, Narayan's short stories have element of humanity at large. He has produced irony in his stories in order to show the flaws of human beings. That is why he is called the reformer of the society and philosopher of life. Narayan likes to pick up his themes from the life of the common man, from the middle and lower strata of the society. In the article, Views of an Indian Novelist published in Indian Foreign Review (1969), he says:

The reflection of day-to-day situations in the short stories of R. K. Narayan made them unique across the world. The realities of life of the common people, the hurdles they confront in day-to-day life, their responses in joyous and sorrowful moment, the never ending troubles they face, etc., are all reflected in Narayan's stories. His short stories are the authentic projection of the society. A wide variety of characters and their behavior are very truthfully portrayed in his stories. His short stories are very true to life and they convey some messages.

R. K. Narayan always picks up the subject matter for his stories from his surroundings. He lives in South India and travels across the world and his experiences and practical observation of life around help him in shaping his characters and moulding his stories. He himself says that Malgudi is an imaginary town, but the characters therein can be found everywhere in the world.

The characters in Narayan's novels are from the South India. His characters are drawn from all the strata of society. They are—peasants, teachers, clerks, shopkeepers, aristocrats, etc. In his novels or stories, there is a perennial appeal to his readers.

Narayan's use of language is simple and lucid and his command over English language is remarkable. Narayan's style is similar to Tamil usage and there is also spontaneous use of Indian English idioms.

R. K. Narayan's stories are based on plots. In his stories, the incidents and characters are given less emphasis than the happenings of day-to-day life. Though ordinary incidents are taken as his subject matter for his stories, yet they have depth in creating effectiveness.

Narayan writes his novels and short stories as a true artist. He is different from his contemporaries—Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Through his writings, he tries to give his writers the joy of a purely creative artist. Though he loves humanity, he never takes sides. No didacticism, no philosophy, no propaganda can be seen in his novels. His interpretation of the Indian life is unprejudiced. Narayan has sympathy for his characters. His characters whether wicked or virtuous, are drawn with extraordinary delicacy and tenderness. They become interesting and amazing figures in the compassionate hands of Narayan. He always tells his story clearly and in a straightforward simple manner. His novels transport readers into a different world. It was into this uncomplicated, almost casual atmosphere of simplicity that Malgudi was born. The greatness of R. K. Narayan lies in his presentation of psychological behavior of his characters with minute details.

R. K. Narayan is much interested in the presentation of the inner happenings in the minds and in the hearts of his characters. He also successfully presents the conflict between the Western and the Eastern sensibilities in front of his readers.

R. K. Narayan is a true artist. With dedication and seriousness, he has pursued the art of storytelling. Narayan is a skilful writer who narrates real and factual events very effectively. His description of everything is in a simple and direct manner. Narayan himself is a simple man.

Narayan's Malgudi:

R. K. Narayan's Malgudi is an imaginary town where different kinds of people live. Here, both ordinary and extraordinary people live with their different views. Malgudi is the backbone of his novels and short stories without which his works are incomplete. The time of creation of this town is also very significant. It is created in September 1930 on VijayaDashami, an auspicious day³⁷. Narayan never provides strict constraints for the town, he allows it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future.

Many readers of Narayan believe that Malgudi represents India or at least South India and its culture and tradition. It is a place where modernity is far far away, where simplicity exists, where Indianness can be seen. Though the readers of Narayan know that Malgudi is a place of fantasy, yet Narayan's strong narration and description of each and every incident and character make them believe that Malgudi really exists.

Though Malgudi is an imaginary town in South India yet in the larger context it represents the whole of India. William Walsh says that the fictional town Malgudi is essentially Indian with a unique identity.

Though a kind of local habitation and a name, Malgudi has a ring of the universal around it. "What happens in India happens in Malgudi and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere," said William Walsh. Various critics compare Narayan's Malgudi with Thomas Hardy's Wessex or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. It is a town which is created from his own experience, his childhood, his upbringing. The people he meets everyday are the people in it.

Narayan's stories have universal appeal as they represent humanity at large. His characters also belong to different professions. They are beggars, servants, knife sharpener, rickshaw puller, postman, snake charmer, astrologer, gateman, shopkeeper, housewives, children, unemployed youths, writers, storyteller, etc. His characters are portrayed in a realistic way and they always fascinate the readers. The middle class and a few higher middle class characters are depicted in his stories. He believes not only in his main characters, but also in his minor ones. According to him, society completes with the presence of each and every major and minor characters.

R. K. Narayan loves to draw ordinary people and their hardship in his works. He loves to present simple incidents of their lives. In the introduction to his last collection of short stories Narayan himself has expressed his opinion in the following words:

"I enjoy writing a short story. Unlike the novel, which emerges from relevant, minutely worked out detail, the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax."

R. K. Narayan presents his characters with a positive message. They provide ways and means to live life amidst the harsh situation. Narayan's approach to life is always realistic.

In the realm of literature R.K. Narayan hold a unique place. The themes of the short stories of R.K. Narayan are mainly related to the middle class or lower middle class of society. The prime focus of his in their stories is the portrayal of the struggling lives of the common people. Narayan have depicted the common people's ways of living and their struggle for survival and these make their stories memorable. R. K. Narayan has used English as his medium. Though he have used different languages, their languages are simple and common people can easily understand them. An authentic picture of the poor class of society and their lives are well depicted in his stories. The constant fight of

the common people to fulfill their needs is reflected in the stories of Narayan. The writer have narrated everything minutely. By putting proper dialogues in the mouth of their characters and with proper atmosphere they make their stories lively and very much realistic. He has concerned for the society. His concern mainly for the downtrodden section is clearly reflected in their stories. He has kept aside the aristocratic society and focused primarily on the middle class and lower middle class people in their stories. The daily life of the common people and their tussle for survival can be seen in their stories. The problems and sufferings of the common people and their combat to meet their needs are beautifully sketched in the stories of R. K. Narayan.

A true picture of the common people's ways of living and their constant struggle with the hurdles of life is beautifully portrayed through the stories by R.K. Narayan.

Conclusion :

R. K. Narayan is one of the founding pillars of Indian writing in English. He is an institution in himself. He is a true Indian both in spirit and thought. Narayan's short stories begin with realistic setting. The everyday happenings in the lives of a cross section of Indian society are portrayed in his stories. His stories are simple but they are the realistic projection of life. Narayan presents the characters passing through a period of struggle and transition. The miseries of common people are well depicted in his short stories. He expresses heart breaking struggles of human race and their combat to overcome the complexities of life are beautifully portrayed in his short stories. R.K. Narayan had showcases the true Indianness in his short stories.

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