



## R. K. NARAYAN'S PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION KARMA: A STUDY IN THE PERCEPTION OF VEDANTA

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### ABSTRACT

*The great admiration towards the master-story teller, R.K. Narayan was a starting point of this research project. Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (1906 – 2001), one of the founding pillars of Indian Writing in English is an institution in himself. R. K. Narayan has translated and published shortened prose versions of the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and a few Hindu mythical tales in Gods, Demons and Others. Narayan authored books like, 'Mr. Sampath' (1949), 'The Financial Expert' (1951) and 'Waiting for the Mahatma (1955)', etc. He wrote 'The Guide' in 1956 while he was touring United States. It earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award. In 1961, he wrote his next novel called 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi'. Teaching the fictional works of R.K. at the undergraduate classes gave this researcher an insight into "how" the story was told than "what" was told in the story. This preference of "how" over "what" later led to the sociolinguistic investigation of R.K. Narayan's fictional works. However the admiration towards the story teller never prevented the researcher from studying his works objectively, that is to say, admiration took another turn the language way.*

**Keywords:** Action, epics, fictions, philosophy, stories

### Introduction

Born in a South Indian family of “the purest Brahmin stock” Narayan’s roots in religion and family were strengthened by his maternal grandmother who was instrumental in introducing him during his childhood to classical Indian and Tamil cultures, languages and

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literature, defining the traditional Brahmin values and ways of life. Every evening she made him recite the Tamil alphabet followed by Avvaiyar's saying as well as a few Sanskrit Slokas praising Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning. Narayan's traditional family and social background thus initiated him in early stage of his life in the knowledge of Hindu philosophy, religion and culture. In one of his interviews with Susan E. Craft, Narayan remarks, "There are so many stories, so much symbolism, so much imagery. That's where we should start."

R. K. Narayan has translated and published shortened prose versions of the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and a few Hindu mythical tales in Gods, Demons and Others. Much has been said about Narayan as an outstanding and unassailable story-teller. Volumes of research have been published on his eye-catching narrative style and his art of characterization. If Raja Rao is termed as a novelist of metaphysics, Narayan is often applauded as a painter of vivid Malgudi, a microcosm of Indian social milieu. He has always been claimed as a novelist par excellence in matters of social criticism of India. But little has been written on how Narayan incorporates the profoundest Indian thoughts, philosophies and spiritualism in general and theory of Karma in particular in his novels.

Narayan's fiction includes a series of books about people and their interactions in an imagined town in South India. He is one of four leading 89 figures of early Indian literature in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao. Narayan is credited with bringing Indian literature in English to the rest of the world, and is regarded as one of India's greatest English language novelists. Narayan broke through with the help of his mentor and friend, Graham Greene, who was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books, including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts and The English Teacher. Narayan's works also include The Financial Expert, hailed as one of the most original works of 1951, and Sahitya Akademi Award winner The Guide, which was adapted for films in Hindi and English languages.

Narayan wrote his first novel, Swami and Friends, in 1935, after short, uninspiring stints as a teacher, an editorial assistant, and a newspaperman. In it, he invented the small south Indian city of Malgudi, a literary microcosm that critics later compared to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. More than a dozen novels and many short stories that followed were set in Malgudi. His writing style has been compared to that of Guy de Maupassant as they both have an ability to compress the narrative without losing out on elements of the story. Narayan's second novel, Bachelor of Arts (1939), marked the beginning of his reputation in England, where the novelist Graham Greene was largely responsible for getting it published. Greene has

called Narayan "the novelist I most admire in the English language." (4) His fourth novel, *The English Teacher*, published in 1945, was partly autobiographical, concerning a teacher's struggle to cope with the death of his wife. In 1953, Michigan State University published it under the title *Grateful to Life and Death*, along with his novel *The Financial Expert*; they were Narayan's first books published in the United States.

### **Child Hood and Early Life**

R. K. Narayan was born in Chennai, India in 1906 in a working class south Indian family. His father was a school headmaster and because his father had to be frequently transferred for his job, Narayan spent most of his childhood in the loving care of his grandmother, Parvati. It was his grandmother who taught him arithmetic, mythology and Sanskrit. He also attended many different schools in Chennai like, Lutheran Mission School, Christian College High School, etc. He was interested in English literature since he was very young. His reading habit further developed when he moved to Mysore with his family and there his father's school library offered him gems of writing from authors like Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Wodehouse, etc. In 1926, he passed the university examination and joined Maharaja College of Mysore. After completing his graduation, Narayan took a job as a school teacher in a local school. Soon after, he realized that he could only be happy in writing fiction, which is why he decided to stay at home and write.

### **Career**

Narayan's decision of staying at home and writing was supported in every way by his family and in 1930, he wrote his first novel called 'Swami and Friends' which was rejected by a lot of publishers. But this book was important in the sense that it was with this that he created the fictional town of Malgudi. After getting married in 1933, Narayan became a reporter for a newspaper called 'The Justice' and in the meantime, he sent the manuscript of 'Swami and Friends' to his friend at Oxford who in turn showed it to Graham Greene. Greene got the book published.

His second novel, 'The Bachelors of Arts', was published in 1937. It was based on his experiences at college. This book was again published by Graham Greene who by now started counseling Narayan on how to write and what to write about to target the English speaking audience. In 1938, Narayan wrote his third novel called 'The Dark Room' dealt with the subject of emotional abuse within a marriage and it was warmly received, both by readers and critics.

The same year his father expired and he had to accept regular commission by the government. In 1939, his wife's unfortunate demise left Narayan depressed and disgruntled. But he continued to write and came out with his fourth book called 'The English Teacher' which was more autobiographical than any of his prior novels.

After this, Narayan authored books like, 'Mr. Sampath' (1949), 'The Financial Expert' (1951) and 'Waiting for the Mahatma (1955)', etc. He wrote 'The Guide' in 1956 while he was touring United States. It earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award. In 1961, he wrote his next novel called 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi'. After finishing this book, he travelled to the United States and Australia. He also gave lectures on Indian literature in Sydney and Melbourne. With his growing success, he also started writing columns for The Hindu and The Atlantic. His first mythological work 'Gods, Demons and Others', a collection of short stories was published in 1964. His book was illustrated by his younger brother R. K. Laxman, who was a famous cartoonist. In 1967, he came up with his next novel titled 'The Vendor of Sweets'. Later, that year Narayan travelled to England, where he received the first of his honorary doctorates from the University of Leeds. Within next few years he started translating Kamba Ramayanam to English a promise he made to his dying uncle once. Narayan was asked by the government of Karnataka to write a book to promote tourism which he republished in 1980 with the title of 'The Emerald Route'. In the same year he was named as the honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 1980, Narayan was chosen as the member of Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament and throughout his 6 years term he focused on the education system and how little children suffer in it.

During the 1980s Narayan wrote prolifically. His works during this period include: 'Malgudi Days' (1982), 'Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories', 'A Tiger for Malgudi' (1983), 'Talkative Man' (1986) and 'A Writer's Nightmare' (1987). In 1990s, his published works include: 'The World of Nagaraj (1990)', 'Grandmother's Tale (1992)', 'The Grandmother's Tale and Other Stories (1994)', etc.

### **Awards & Achievements**

Narayan won numerous accolades for his literary works. These include: Sahitya Akademi Award (1958), Padma Bhushan (1964), AC Benson Medal by the British Royal Society of Literature (1980), and Padma Vibhushan (2001).

## **Personal Life & Legacy**

In 1933, Narayan met his future wife Rajam, a 15 year old girl, and fell deeply in love with her. They managed to get married despite many astrological and financial hurdles.

Rajam died of typhoid in 1939 and left a three year old daughter for Narayan to take care of. Her death caused a great shock in his life and he was left depressed and uprooted for a long period of time. He never remarried in his life. Narayan died in 2001 at the age of 94. He was planning on writing his next novel, a story on a grandfather, just before he expired.

## **Trivia**

He was very fond of the publisher of The Hindu, N. Ram, and used to spend all his time, towards the end of his life, conversing with him over coffee. Narayan is regarded as one of the three leading English language Indian fiction writers, along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand.

## **The Philosophy of Action/ *Karma***

R. K. Narayan is primarily a novelist, not a philosopher. Though he imports the material from the traditional wisdom and store-house of India, he makes it contemporary. His subject matter is based on the myths, legends, stories and incidents from the Vedas, the Puranas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagwad Gita. By and large, Narayan's novels permeate in Indian culture and tradition, ideologies and views that are fore-grounded in Indian philosophy and thought.

R. K. Narayan's characters with a fore-grounding in the cultural life of their society have deeply absorbed and assumed philosophical ways of life. The characters' position in his novels corroborates T. S. Eliot's views of "historic sense and tradition" as prescribed by him in his essay entitled Tradition and Individual Talent. (6) His major characters have the "historic sense" of drawing the traditional philosophy and religion into their lives. Although they cherish the ancient values and retain the traditional ways of life yet they do not hesitate in bringing about a change, adopting and adapting to the modern ways of life.

R. K. Narayan's fiction reiterates the doctrine of Karma (action) in the Indian philosophical systems. This innate trust in life and the capacity of its renewal in the face of a threat of its existence is the central principle of his fiction. The Indian philosophy regards this life which functions in a cyclic order subjected to various ups and downs as medium of realizing the true self. "The Law of Karma is assumed by Samkara. Individuality is due to

Karma, which is a product of Advaita. The kind of world into which we are born is just the return of the works of the doer. The individual organism is the working machinery intended to produce that requital in the form of actions and it results into suffering and happiness.

According to Hindu philosophy, Karma is often described as causal law, operating on the moral and spiritual planes. Just as every effect is said to have a cause in the physical world so is the case in the spiritual and moral world. The law of Karma is the law of cause and effect, the succession in which each effect follows its own cause, the result of an action is hidden in its performance.

## Conclusion

The great admiration towards the master-story teller, R.K. Narayan was a starting point of this research project. Teaching the fictional works of R.K. at the undergraduate classes gave this researcher an insight into "how" the story was told than "what" was told in the story. This preference of "how" over "what" later led to the sociolinguistic investigation of R.K. Narayan's fictional works. However the admiration towards the story teller never prevented the researcher from studying his works objectively, that is to say, admiration took another turn the language way. Quite often while travelling along with Narayan and his characters, the researcher was astonished to see the variety and abundance of dialects, idiolects, regionalised and creolized versions of language manifest in the multitude of characters in R. K, hence the choice of a sociolinguistic framework.

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