



**Exploring Indianness in R.K. Narayan's *Under the Banyan Tree* and
*A Horse and Two Goats***

Parameshwar B. Vikhe

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English

Arts, Science and Commerce College, Kolhar

Email- param_vikhe21@rediffmail.com

Abstract

R.K. Narayan is known as one of most prominent figures in Indian English literature due to his unique talent to sketch the Indian life in an understandable manner, with a slight touch of humor and a cultural depth. His works are a true reflection of the Indian society without being unnecessarily 'exotic' or using a nationalist rhetoric. Two of his short stories, *Under the Banyan Tree* and *A Horse and Two Goats*, are great examples of how typical Indian lifestyle is in the surroundings, characters, belief systems, oral traditions, and the way of speaking. This research elaborates on the concept of 'Indianness' in the stories and recognizes Narayan's works as a part of the postcolonial Indian writing discourse.

By analyzing the rural background, cultural signs and customs, plot, and the religious undercurrent, the article demonstrates that Narayan's both stories are a mirror to cultural identity of India which is the most fundamental characteristic of his narratives. The way he presents the common people is his indirect manner of cultural affirmation and literary genuineness.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, Indianness, Indian English Literature, Rural India, Oral Tradition, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (1906–2001), better known as R.K. Narayan, is significant figures in Indian English literature and is known as one of the major pioneers of Indian English fiction. Malgudi, a fictional town in his works is the immortal representation of Indian life—a creative realm where the simple nature, contradictions, humor, and the spiritual aspect of India become visible through the lives of common people. Narayan, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, was instrumental in defining the characteristics of Indian writing in English during the postcolonial period. He is very different from other post-independence writers in the sense that he

does not emphasize the political conflict or colonial critique. His fiction is mainly about the life in small towns, villages, and the characters who are the carriers of the Indian ethos.

The idea of *Indianness* is basically the central feature of Narayan's work. *Indianness* means the depiction of an Indian cultural identity that consists of one's native language, traditions, religious beliefs, customs, and even a person's general way of thinking. From a literary perspective, it is the writing that faithfully conveys the experiences of Indians, usually through the realism of the local milieu and the use of indigenous narrative forms. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Indian writing in English must mirror the Indian ethos, sensibility and thought-patterns if it is to be meaningful" (Iyengar 25). R.K. Narayan exactly does that.

His two short stories *Under the Banyan Tree* and *A Horse and Two Goats* artistically illustrate this feature. The both stories are located in the countryside of South India and revolve around common villagers, their traditions, faith, and relations with the humankind around them. Narayan through these stories displays *Indianness* not as an idea but as the existence that has been experienced.

Conceptualizing *Indianness* in Indian English Literature

Indianness is not only the presence of Indian surroundings or characters, but it is also a whole sensibility—a single way of seeing and showing reality. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "The true task of Indian writing in English is to express the Indian ethos and sensibility in a once foreign but now made one's own language" (Iyengar 25). This means that the Indian cultural elements should be smoothly mingled with the English language without changing them or making them look strange for the foreign readers.

M.K. Naik in a similar vein propounds that R.K. Narayan's Indianness is "without effort, natural, and deeply rooted in Indian soil. His writing is never pushed by the necessity of Indianness; it simply *is* Indian" (Naik 112). Narayan achieves this effect by narrating everyday situations—conversations under a banyan tree, a farmer tending to his goats, a village gathering to hear stories—and investing them with cultural resonance

The theme of the cultural identity is the main concern of the postcolonial literature. The most debatable point of the postcolonial literature i.e. a struggle between a local cultural expression and global readership was accentuated by theorists like Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha. Narayan finds out the solution of this contradiction by depicting Indian culture in a very down-to-earth manner, without either over-explaining it or toning it down.

Setting and Cultural Symbolism: The Indian Village

The settings of both *Under the Banyan Tree* and *A Horse and Two Goats* are the countryside of South India. Narayan's rural setting is not an archetypal '*Oriental*' background made for the sake

of Western interest but a living, dynamics within social communities. He accomplishes it by showing both the tangible and the intangible sides of the village life—its rites, collective trust, and economic hardships—with absolute accuracy.

In *Under the Banyan Tree*, the surroundings of Somal village are visualized as being dependent on the banyan tree. The tree in this context is not considered a mere scenery; it is a very impactful cultural symbol. In the Indian rural culture, banyan trees are regarded as the places for socializing and reunions where the group of people can openly chat about their daily lives, exchange views, and perform their rituals. These trees are also regarded as holy - most of all they are signs of long life, wisdom, and protection. Narayan's use of such a symbol emulates how *Indianness* is not only a thing of the mind but is woven into the land and collective practices.

However, the droughty village that can be seen in *A Horse and Two Goats*, where Muni is living, is depicted with a perfect portrayal of it: dusty roads, an old shack, grazing goats, and a worn-out horse statue in front of a temple. This rural setting is not idealized. The author describes the economic suffering and cultural splendor of Indian village life alongside. Muni, an elderly poor rustic man communicates to his surroundings not as a stranger but as someone who is profoundly mixed up with its myths and history.

Indianness in *Under the Banyan Tree*

Under the Banyan Tree revolves around the life of Nambi, an old storyteller whose gift of narrating a story made him the idol of his village people. Every evening, the villagers assemble around the banyan tree to listen his stories created from myths, epics, and folklore. This scene in his story is typically Indian one. For thousands of years, tradition of storytelling has been there in the Indian culture, which is even older than the written word. Oral literature of this kind is at the roots of the Indian mega-epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in addition to innumerable local folk tales which have helped to establish cultural memory and social values.

The banyan tree is not simply a place but a living entity that represents eternity, the village community, and shared customs. Storytelling under the tree bridges gap between old and new generations, fusing aspects of amusement, moral teaching, and spiritual worship. Upon Nambi's loss of his storytelling power, the villagers decide it to be God's will and not a mere human disease. Their perception about it is typically Indian where a spiritual or cosmic force governs the all the happenings in life rather than giving a place to rational explanations.

Moreover, Nambi's decision to leave the storytelling profession and seek refuge in the temple after losing his gift is typical Indian inclination to seek solace in religion or spirituality at times of crisis in the life. Narayan depicts it in a very subtle way, without giving his opinion or praise. The Indian

poet A.K. Ramanujan in his essay “*Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?*” points out that “Indian narratives are known for their unique feature of seeing everyday experience as embedded in larger cosmic frames thereby treating the ordinary as part of the sacred order” (Ramanujan 39). Nambi’s case is a perfect example of such a tradition.

Indianness in *A Horse and Two Goats*

Narayan discloses Indianness through the character Muni, an aged, poor villager in *A Horse and Two Goats*. Muni is a goat herder and lives a simple life, dreaming of better days. The story mainly contrasts his simple, myth-filled worldview with that of a rich Western tourist who visits his village. Their talk, despite language barriers, turns out to be a funny but serious exchange of their cultures. or Muni, the horse statue in front of the temple is more than just an object made of stone. It signifies Kalki, the last incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who according to the Hindu myth will come on a white horse to end Kali Yuga and establish dharma again. This explanation is a good example of how Indian villagers habitually decode their environment through religious and mythological wisdom. On the other hand, to the tourist, the statue is simply a piece of beauty - a product to be purchased and taken away.

The cultural misunderstanding is humorous as well as eye-opening. Narayan gently exposes the distinction between the two worlds - one being the spiritual and the other the material, the local and the global. He neither portrays Muni’s world as perfect nor the tourist’s as evil. Instead, he demonstrates how two cultural views can clash and blend without coming to any conclusion.

Muni’s poverty is additionally a significant aspect of *Indianness* in the narrative. His everyday challenge of to get food, his habit of relying on goats, and his wife’s work of making their daily provisions depict the Indian village life materially in the middle of the last century. Narayan describes this poverty without melodrama, instead by employing irony and understatement. As Meenakshi Mukherjee states, “Narayan is a storyteller of unnoticed lives, and it is through their ordinariness that he discovers cultural significance” (Mukherjee 65).

Language and Indian English

Among the major contributions made by Narayan to Indian literature was his usage of Indian English. He did not imitate British English; rather he changed English to suit Indian situations, making it more Indian by using local expressions, and cultural references. The language in *Under the Banyan Tree* is reflective of the village life simplicity and style of the oral storytelling. Nambi’s speaking is very similar to the South Indian speech pattern converted into English.

In the story *A Horse and Two Goats*, Muni’s speech stands out to be the most informative one. Although conveyed in English, it closely follows the Tamil grammatical pattern and

conversational style. His expressions and gestures communicate to the American even when he cannot grasp things from the language. This method serves as a good example of how one's language can still be a vehicle of one's culture even if another is not familiar with the words. M.K. Naik comments: "Narayan has the rare ability to make his English carry the flavor of Indian speech without distorting the language" (Naik 115).

Narayan's means of reaching the world was through writing in English but still preserving the local elements. His English is not a "mediator" that shows India to non-Indians; rather, it is a direct representation of India.

Religion and Spirituality as Cultural Forces

Religious aspects are the major ones that make the narrations of Narayan identifiable as Indian. In the works *Under the Banyan Tree* and *A Horse and Two Goats*, characters' beliefs in religions not only control but also deeply influence their perceptions of the events happening around them. For the villagers in Somal, the Nambi's gift of storytelling is celestial. When this ability leaves him, they do not ask for logical reasons—rather, they consider it as God's wish. The turning point when Nambi finds solace in worshipping the temple god illustrates the role of religion in the life pattern of the Indians, especially in village areas.

Religious elements in the *A Horse and Two Goats* story are reflected through Muni's understanding of the horse statue in accordance with Hindu mythological stories which is a great example of how spiritual narratives influences human interactions with the world. The temple is not an ancient, remote, heavenly place different from life's routine; it is the village itself that has grown around it and is inextricably linked with it.

Narayan depicts these beliefs with gentle irony but with respect. He neither treats them as a source of profit by portraying them in a glamorous way nor does he look down upon them. Rather, he exhibits how religion becomes a framework and a source of the rural lifestyle that is full of Indian traditions.

Indianness and Universal Humanism

One of the most notable points about Narayan's writing is its universal appeal. His tales are not only strongly influenced by Indian culture, but they also have resonance with all the readers in the globe. These themes - the storytelling, old age, poverty, faith, cultural misunderstanding, and community - are all universal human experiences.

William Walsh argues that "Narayan's Malgudi is at once particular and universal. He does not generalize India, but through one single small town, he reveals human nature itself" (Walsh 90). Nambi's losing power to tell stories is a signal to universal fears of aging and losing one's place

in the world. Muni's failure in communication with the American tourist shows the cross-cultural encounters, which are at the same time, full of laughter, and sorrow, and occur everywhere. This balance between rootedness and universality this wave is also the core of Narayan's Indianness.

Conclusion

R.K. Narayan's *Under the Banyan Tree* and *A Horse and Two Goats* are the outstanding piece of writings that not only depict the Indian way of life but also do it with great simplicity, depth, and humor. By way of their village setting, oral traditions, faith in gods, ways of speaking, and quiet irony, these narratives present India as a living cultural environment. The Indianness here is not a slogan or an ideological concept but a living reality—one that is made up of banyan trees, temple horses, village storytellers, and old men with goats.

It is Narayan's talent to present Indian culture in English as something normal which is his way of showing it with quiet self-assurance instead of giving an explanatory defensive account. His stories do not assert cultural identity through confrontation but rather through authenticity. By so doing, he presents to the world a literature that is both deeply local and extremely universal.

Nambi and Muni, two simple village men, are the characters through which Indianness is examined, glorified, and kept intact. Narayan's effect on Indian English literature is still very important as a result of him showing that Indian stories, told in an Indian way, can speak to the world.

Works Cited

Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 1985.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. Heinemann, 1971.

Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 1982.

Narayan, R. K. "A Horse and Two Goats." *The New Yorker*, 1970.

Narayan, R. K. *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*. Penguin, 2007.

Ramanujan, A. K. *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*. Oxford UP, 1967.

Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.