

# R.K. Narayan and The Hindu Ethos

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## **Abstract**

The raw material of the novelist comes from the actual world in which he lives and breathes. The people he meets in real life - his family and relations, his friends and acquaintances, official functionaries, saints and sinners, and persons of all shades and types who constitute the web of society and its institutions - social, cultural, political and religious, customs and manners, traditions and conventions, beliefs and superstitions - leave an indelible mark on his heart and soul. And when he creates his fictional world, they stream into his memory and clamour for being reborn. Fiction transforms the actual world into the imaginary world. It is shaped by his imagination which embodies his vision of life and gives it a local habitation and a name.

Narayan has the love of the actual and the concrete so deeply rooted in his mind and soul that the world of his imagination at times appears to be a transcription of the actual world in which he lives. Narayan, like Dickens, came to fiction

through journalism and he possesses a born journalist's gift of accurate observation and faithful reporting of actual people, scenes and occurrences. Though compared with Dickens, his gift of the eye is not as sharp as his gift of the ear, Narayan does succeed in creating people and scenes which the reader can visualize. The events narrated in his novels are like the occurrences of the real life, and the conversation of the people in his novels is life-like. He catches every idiom, the townend rhythm different categories of persons and when they speak, we at once recognise their individual tone and voice. The world he creates seems actual and vivid and the persons life-like and living. The socio-cultural ambience-the economic compulsions, family and personal bonds, socio-political environment, religious and cultural traditions, the impact of modernity on the past and the influence of the West on the East - in which his characters move is strikingly real. "Actuality, one feels, is not 'being bullied or tricked into false positions. Nor is it being sucked up into some dominating and abstract symbolizing system,'"<sup>1</sup> observes Professor William Walsh. Narayan's people resemble people whom we come across in life, and the world of which they form a part is a replica of the actual world, transformed by his creative imagination."

Narayan is a typical Indian writer whose creative genius is deeply rooted in the ancient Indian religion which attaches great importance to self-discipline, renunciation, incarnation, doctrine of rebirth, law of karma and non-violence. In almost all his major novels these Indian themes find their expression in some form or another. Sometimes they form the basic theme

of the novels and sometimes they provide a mythical pattern or a framework for them. Famous legends sustain or broaden their significance. What Daisy says of Raman in *The Painter of Signs* holds equally good for his creator R.K. Narayan: "You always find some ancient model."<sup>2</sup> Narayan always finds an ancient myth or legend to express his vision of modern life. This tendency grew more prominent as he crossed his fiftieth year. In *Mr. Sampath* there is a reference to the burning of Kama by Lord Shiva (the lord of love by the lord of destruction). The Guide is based on the traditional Hind. belief that gods can be propitiated and rains can be brought about to end a severe drought if somebody sacrifices his life through fasting and prayer. Vasu, the central character of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, is modeled on Bhasmasura. The mythological relationship of the holy Ganga and King Shantanu offers a parallel to Daisy-Raman relationship in *The Painter of Signs*. The oneness of soul of all living beings - tiger and man alike, its sublimation through gradual self-discipline and renunciation, and its final salvation from the bondage of karma and the cycle of birth is the central theme of Narayan's latest novel *A Tiger for Malgudi*, which may possibly be interpreted as a political or moral allegory. In the words of Professor William Walsh, "The religious 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 ordering human feeling and experience. What one can say about Narayan without qualification is that he embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism. In Narayan Hinduism appears at the natural substratum of a

sensibility preoccupied with individuality, with the specific, with particularisation. Not that he is concerned with a mere ticked collection of particulars. Each detail is seen and presented so as to imply an essential truth about its own nature, just as the aggregate of details is raised from a simple collection to an order or world or portrait. A detail in Narayan is not only close to the essential object but it contributes its part to a significant whole.”<sup>3</sup>

The use of myth and legend in the novels of Narayan does not make the mere illustrations of abstract ideologies and beliefs. Rather emerges as the final vision of the present day reality as visualized by the author. It reinforces and enhances its appeal by linking the modern with the ancient Indian tradition. In this respect Narayan is in the line of old Indian saints and prophets interpreting the present-day human conditions in terms of ancient myths, legends and fables. Narayan’s view of life is incorporated in and expressed through rich circumstantial details. The concrete particulars are so accurate and convincing, the human actors so life-like and vital and their motivations psychologically so true that the presence of the central mythical idea never dominates or obscures or obliterates the real life depicted by the author who is a social realist.

Narayan’s novels are essentially stories of Indian life. Most of them trace the growth of an individual who is firmly rooted in the Indian social order. The protagonists - Swaminathan, Chandran, Krishnan, Ramani, Raji, Mr. Sampath, Margayya, Jagan, Sriram and Raman - are usually

the members of a Hindu joint family. They have strong familial bonds and are deeply attached to their protective parents, children and grandchildren, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. Even now, in spite of the impact of modernism, the basic unit of Indian society is the family and it is a joint family. The individual has to grow in this environment and his character is shaped, at times it is warped, by the overwhelming influence of the members of the family even in such important matters as choosing his career and choosing his wife. The family itself observes the age-old customs, traditions and beliefs as the Hindu religion. "The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously",<sup>4</sup> writes Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah with a sarcastic sharpness.

The two most important time-honored categorical imperatives of Hindu society are Varna and Ashrama, popularly known as Varnashrama. They regulate the social and spiritual aspirations of an average Indian. Even the most emancipated and modernized Indians, who openly reject the traditional beliefs and customs based on them, are unconsciously guided by them in their life through this world, and they enshrine their hopes for the world to come or their lives after death.

The man-woman relationship in India is not so free and uninhibited as it is in the West. Here the lover has to suffer from the inquisitive eyes and questioning comments of the members of the family and neighbors. Raman is furious at his aunt who guards him so zealously, and at the scrutinizing watchfulness of the Malgudians who peer into his private life-

his love affair with Daisy : “This was a wretched part of the town. He wondered for a moment whether he should not sell his old house and take up his residence in a more civilized locality like the New Extension or leave Malgudi itself-this conservative town unused to modern life.”<sup>5</sup>

As Professor William Walsh has rightly observed, ““Narayan’s religious view of life...enlarges the boundaries and complicates the texture of (his) assumptions, even if it is in his ‘Case confined to one spat, Sarayu Street, in Malgudi.”<sup>6</sup> But what happens in Malgudi! happens all over India with slight regional variations. In *The English Teacher*, when Susila and her baby, accompanied by Krishnan’s father-in-law and Krishna Himself, who goes to the station receive His Young Wife And daughter, arrive home in a Victoria carriage, a traditional reception is extended to them by the mother-in-law before they are allowed to enter the house. A proper ceremony awaits them at the gate and this is what happens in Malgudi or for that matter, in any village or town in India:

‘My mother came down and welcomed her at the gate. She had decorated the threshold with a festoon of green mango leaves and the floor and doorway with white flour designs. She was standing at the doorway and as soon as we got down cried : “Let Susila and the child stay where they are.” She had a pan of vermilion solution ready at hand and circled it before the young mother and child, before allowing them to get down from the carriage. After that she held out her arms, and the baby vanished in her embrace.’<sup>7</sup>

### Reference

1. *William Walsh, R.K. Narayan: A Critical appreciation (New Delhi Allied, 1983), p.165.*
2. *The Painter of Signs (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1977), p.159.*
3. *R.K. Narayan : A Critical Appreciation (New Delhi : Allied, 1983), pp. 166-67.*
4. *The Swan and the Eagle (Simla : 1969), p.58.*
5. *A Tiger For Malgudi (New Delhi : Allied, 1983), pp.170-71.*
6. *R.K. Narayan : A Critical Appreciation (New Delhi : Allied, 1983), p.52.*
7. *The English Teacher (Mysore : Indian Thought Publications, 1955), p.35.*