

LIFE OF THE ORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN EXPRESSED IN R.K. NARAYAN'S WORKS

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), a world renowned novelist, is one of three leading figures of early Indian fiction in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award (1958) and he was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India. Narayan's novels deal with people in an imaginary town in South India called Malgudi. His narratives highlight social context and provide a feel for his characters through everyday life. Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), set during India's struggle for independence, is the only novel by Narayan that has a political backdrop. Ananth Majumdar comments:

While Waiting for the Mahatma includes significant references to the Indian independence movement, the focus is on the life of the ordinary men and women.

Introduction

Waiting for the Mahatma is the first novel of Narayan where you we find the theme of love. India's struggle for independence under Gandhi only serves as a background to Sriram and Bharathi's unconventional romance. The story is basically about ordinary Indian men and women who join the Gandhian movement for a variety of reasons. Sriram is a high school graduate who lives with his grandmother in Malgudi. He is attracted to Bharathi, a girl his age who is active in the Mahatma's Quit India movement. Sriram becomes a Gandhian activist after falling in love with Bharathi, an idealistic woman who follows Gandhi on his tours. *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a compelling story. It is set in the Gandhian era of the struggle for independence – particularly from the Quit India Movement to the dawn of Indian independence. The action covers the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Sriram's town of Malgudi and the eventual assassination of the great man. In a sense, the novel is a biography of Mahatma Gandhi in the last phase of his life. Narayan captures Gandhian message of non-violence in his speeches to Indian masses:

*When someone has wronged you or has done something
which appears to you to be evil just pray for the destruction of that evil.*

Narayan's Works

At the beginning of *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Sriram is twenty years old but his behaviour is of a ten-year old child. He lost his parents in his early childhood and has been raised by his grandmother. Sriram is an aimless young man and has no sense of responsibility. Bharathi is a humble disciple of Gandhi who comes to Malgudi with the Mahatma. The coming of the Mahatma to Malgudi changes the narrative of novel. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan provides indications that the promise of a future happiness in independent India is not likely to be fulfilled anytime soon. Sriram is united to Bharathi amidst the tragedy of partition. Even the sanctity of purpose in joining the independence movement is gently questioned by the novelist. Sriram's aim throughout was to get Bharathi rather than India's freedom. More disturbing is the fact, as Narayan points out, that people like Jagadish, a follower of the Indian National Army, joined the independence movement for self-glorification rather than for self-sacrifice. Jagadish collects photographs highlighting his role in the movement. Throughout *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Sriram is waiting for Bharathi who in turn is waiting for Mahatma's consent to marry him. Mahatma Gandhi gives Bharathi consent to marry Sriram. He even agrees to do the 'kanyadan' himself. But the Mahatma is assassinated the very morning the marriage was planned to take place. As the Mahatma appears for the daily prayer, Bharathi and Sriram join him. A man briskly walks past the crowd and pushes Bharathi. Sriram rebukes the man but he walks on to the dais and in no time Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated. Narayan writes:

As the Mahatma was about to step on the dais, the man took aim and fired.

Two more shots rang out. The Mahatma fell on the dais. He was dead in a few seconds.

The Busy Years

After *The English Teacher*, Narayan's writings took a more imaginative and creative external style compared to the semi-autobiographical tone of the earlier novels. His next effort, *Mr. Sampath*, was the first book exhibiting this modified approach. However, it still draws from some of his own experiences, particularly the aspect of starting his own journal; he also makes a marked movement away from his earlier novels by intermixing biographical events. Soon after, he published *The Financial Expert*, considered to be his masterpiece and hailed as one of the most original works of fiction in 1951. The inspiration



for the novel was a true story about a financial genius, *Margayya*, related to him by his brother. The next novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, loosely based on a fictional visit to Malgudi by Mahatma Gandhi, deals with the protagonist's romantic feelings for a woman, when he attends the discourses of the visiting Mahatma. The woman, named Bharathi, is a loose parody of Bharathi, the personification of India and the focus of Gandhi's discourses.

While the novel includes significant references to the Indian independence movement, the focus is on the life of the ordinary individual, narrated with Narayan's usual dose of irony.

In 1953, his works were published in the United States for the first time, by Michigan State University Press, who later (in 1958), relinquished the rights to Viking Press. While Narayan's writings often bring out the anomalies in social structures and views, he was himself a traditionalist; in February 1956, Narayan arranged his daughter's wedding following all orthodox Hindu rituals. After the wedding, Narayan began travelling occasionally, continuing to write at least 1500 words a day even while on the road. *The Guide* was written while he was visiting the United States in 1956 on the Rockefeller Fellowship. While in the U.S., Narayan maintained a daily journal that was to later serve as the foundation for his book *My Dateless Diary*. Around this time, on a visit to England, Narayan met his friend and mentor Graham Greene for the first time. On his return to India, *The Guide* was published; the book is the most representative of Narayan's writing skills and elements, ambivalent in expression, coupled with a riddle-like conclusion. The book won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958. Occasionally, Narayan was known to give form to his thoughts by way of essays, some published in newspapers and journals, others not. *Next Sunday* (1960), was a collection of such conversational essays, and his first work to be published as a book. Soon after that, *My Dateless Diary*, describing experiences from his 1956 visit to the United States, was published. Also included in this collection was an essay about the writing of *The Guide*.

Narayan's next novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, was published in 1961. The book was reviewed as having a narrative that is a classical art form of comedy, with delicate control. After the launch of this book, the restless Narayan once again took to travelling, and visited the U.S. and Australia. With his success, both within India and abroad, Narayan started writing columns for magazines and newspapers including *The Hindu* and *The Atlantic*. In 1964, Narayan published his first mythological work, *Gods, Demons and Others*, a collection of rewritten and translated short stories from Hindu epics. Like many of his other works, this book was illustrated by his younger brother R. K. Laxman. In an earlier essay, he had written about the Americans wanting to understand spirituality from him, and during this visit, Swedish-American actress Greta Garbo accosted him on the topic, despite his denial of any knowledge. Narayan's next published work was the 1967 novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*. It was inspired in part by his American visits and consists of



extreme characterizations of both the Indian and American stereotypes, drawing on the many cultural differences. However, while it displays his characteristic comedy and narrative, the book was reviewed as lacking in depth. This year, Narayan travelled to England, where he received the first of his honorary doctorates from the University of Leeds. The next few years were a quiet period for him. He published his next book, a collection of short stories, *A Horse and Two Goats*, in 1970. Meanwhile, Narayan remembered a promise made to his dying uncle in 1938, and started translating the Kamba Ramayanam to English.

The Ramayana was published in 1973, after five years of work. Almost immediately after publishing *The Ramayana*, Narayan started working on a condensed translation of the Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata. While he was researching and writing the epic, he also published another book, *The Painter of Signs* (1977). *The Painter of Signs* is a bit longer than a novella and makes a marked change from Narayan's other works.

The Later Years

Narayan was commissioned by the government of Karnataka to write a book to promote tourism in the state. The work was published as part of a larger government publication in the late 1970s. He thought it deserved better, and republished it as *The Emerald Route* (Indian Thought Publications, 1980). The book contains his personal perspective on the local history and heritage, but being bereft of his characters and creations, it misses his enjoyable narrative. The same year, he was elected as an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and won the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. Around the same time, Narayan's works were translated to Chinese for the first time. In 1983, Narayan published his next novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, about a tiger and its relationship with humans. His next novel, *Talkative Man*, published in 1986, was the tale of an aspiring journalist from Malgudi. During this time, he also published two collections of short stories: *Malgudi Days* (1982), a revised edition including the original book and some other stories, and *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, a new collection. In 1980, Narayan was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian Parliament, for his contributions to literature. During his entire six-year term, he was focused on one issue—the plight of school children, especially the heavy load of school books and the negative effect of the system on a child's creativity, which was something that he first highlighted in his debut novel, *Swami and Friends*. His inaugural speech was focused on this particular problem, and resulted in the formation of a committee chaired by Prof. Yash Pal, to recommend changes to the school educational system. In 1990, he published his next novel, *The World of Nagaraj*, also set in Malgudi. Narayan's age shows in this work as he appears to skip narrative details that he would have included if this were

to his daughter's family. A few years after his move, in 1994, his daughter died of cancer and his granddaughter Bhuvanewari (Minnie) started taking care of him in addition to managing *Indian Thought Publications*. Narayan then published his final book, *Grandmother's Tale*. The book is an autobiographical novella, about his great-grandmother who travelled far and wide to find her husband, who ran away shortly after their marriage. The story was narrated to him by his grandmother, when he was a child.

During his final years, Narayan, ever fond of conversation, would spend almost every evening with N. Ram, the publisher of *The Hindu*, drinking coffee and talking about various topics until well past midnight. Despite his fondness of meeting and talking to people, he stopped giving interviews. The apathy towards interviews was the result of an interview with *Time*, after which Narayan had to spend a few days in the hospital, as he was dragged around the city to take photographs that were never used in the article. In May 2001, Narayan was hospitalised. A few hours before he was to be put on a ventilator, he was planning on writing his next novel, a story about a grandfather. As he was always very selective about his choice of notebooks, he asked N. Ram to get him one. However, Narayan did not get better and never started the novel. He died on May 13, 2001, in Chennai at the age of 94.

Writing Style

Narayan's writing style was simple and unpretentious with a natural element of humour about it. It focused on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbours, cousins and the like, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to the topic. Unlike his national contemporaries, he was able to write about the intricacies of Indian society without having to modify his characteristic simplicity to conform to trends and fashions in fiction writing. He also employed the use of nuanced dialogic prose with gentle Tamil overtones based on the nature of his characters. 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. Greene considered Narayan to be more similar to Chekhov than any Indian writer. Anthony West of *The New Yorker* considered Narayan's writings to be of the realism variety of Nikolai Gogol.

According to Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri, Narayan's short stories have the same captivating feeling as his novels, with most of them less than ten pages long, and taking about as many minutes to read. These characteristics and abilities led Lahiri to classify him as belonging to the pantheon of short-story geniuses that include O. Henry, Frank O'Connor and Flannery O'Connor. Lahiri also compares him to Guy de Maupassant



for their ability to compress the narrative without losing the story, and the common themes of middle-class life written with an unyielding and un pitying vision. Critics have noted that Narayan's writings tend to be more descriptive and less analytical; the objective style, rooted in a detached spirit, providing for a more authentic and realistic narration. His attitude, coupled with his perception of life, provided a unique ability to fuse characters and actions, and an ability to use ordinary events to create a connection in the mind of the reader. Narayan's writing style was often compared to that of William Faulkner since both their works brought out the humour and energy of ordinary life while displaying compassionate humanism. The similarities also extended to their juxtaposing of the demands of society against the confusions of individuality. Although their approach to subjects was similar, their methods were different; Faulkner was rhetorical and illustrated his points with immense prose while Narayan was very simple and realistic, capturing the elements all the same.

Malgudi

Malgudi is a fictional, semi-urban town in southern India, conjured by Narayan. He created the town in September 1930, on Vijayadashami, an auspicious day to start new efforts and thus chosen for him by his grandmother. As he mentioned in a later interview to his biographers Susan and N. Ram, in his mind, he first saw a railway station, and slowly the name *Malgudi* came to him. The town was created with an impeccable historical record, dating to the Ramayana days when it was noted that Lord Rama passed through; it was also said that the Buddha visited the town during his travels. While Narayan never provided strict physical constraints for the town, he allowed it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future. Dr James M. Fennelly, a scholar of Narayan's works, created a map of Malgudi based on the fictional descriptors of the town from the many books and stories. However, when the Historical Societies showed proof that Lawley was strong in his support of the Indian independence movement, the council was forced to undo all their earlier actions. A good comparison to Malgudi, a place that Greene characterised as "more familiar than Battersea or Euston Road", is Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Also, like Faulkner's, when one looks at Narayan's works, the town gets a better definition through the many different novels and stories.

Critical Reception

Narayan first broke through with the help of Graham Greene who, upon reading *Swaminathan and Tate*, took it upon himself to work as Narayan's agent for the book. He was also instrumental in changing the title to the more appropriate *Swami and Friends*, and in finding publishers for Narayan's next few books. Somerset Maugham, on a trip to Mysore in 1938, had asked to meet Narayan, but not enough people had heard of him to actually effect the meeting. Another contemporary writer who took a liking to Narayan's early works was E. M. Forster, an author who shared his dry and humorous narrative, so



much so that Narayan was labeled the "South Indian E. M. Forster" by critics. Despite his popularity with the reading public and fellow writers, Narayan's work has not received the same amount of critical exploration accorded to other writers of his stature. Narayan's success in the United States came a little later, when Michigan State University Press started publishing his books. His first visit to the country was on a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation, and he lectured at various universities including Michigan State University and the University of California, Berkeley. Around this time, John Updike noticed his work and compared Narayan to Charles Dickens. In a review of Narayan's works published in *The New Yorker*, (Books, 1974) Updike called him a writer of a vanishing breed—the writer as a citizen; one who identifies completely with his subjects and with a belief in the significance of humanity.

Having published many novels, essays and short stories, Narayan is credited with bringing Indian writing to the rest of the world. While he has been regarded as one of India's greatest writers of the twentieth century, critics have also described his writings with adjectives such as charming, harmless and benign. A general perception on Narayan was that he did not involve himself or his writings with the politics or problems of India, as mentioned by V. S. Naipaul in one of his columns (*The Wounds of India*, 1976). However, according to Wyatt Mason of *The New Yorker*, (*The fiction of R. K. Narayan*. 2006). In the west, Narayan's simplicity of writing was well received. One of his biographers, William Walsh, (*R. K. Narayan*, 1971) wrote of his narrative as a comedic art with an inclusive vision informed by the transience and illusion of human action. According to Wyatt Mason, in Narayan's works, the individual is not a private entity, but rather a public one. In addition to his early works being among the most important English-language fiction from India, with this innovation, he provided his western readers the first works in English to be infused with an eastern and Hindu existential perspective. Mason also holds the view that Edmund Wilson's assessment of Walt Whitman, "He does not write editorials on events but describes his actual feelings", applies equally to Narayan. Narayan's greatest achievement was making India accessible to the outside world through his literature. He is regarded as one of the three leading English language Indian fiction writers, along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. He gave his readers something to look forward to with Malgudi and its residents and is considered to be one of the best novelists India has ever produced. He brought small-town India to his audience in a manner that was both believable and experiential. Malgudi was not just a fictional town in India, but one teeming with characters, each with their own idiosyncrasies and attitudes, making the situation as familiar to the reader as if it were their own backyard. Thus, *life of the ordinary men and women is realistically and beautifully expressed in R. K. Narayan's works along with the literary taste in the description.*



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