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A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO R. K. NARAYAN'S POST- INDEPENDENCE NOVELS

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Abstract:

In writing his novels R.K. Narayan throughout remains preoccupied with the treatment of social and national issues from a humanistic point of view. His novels which are published after independence delineate the experience of the colonial age and dilemmas of post-independent realities. Here Narayan has more or less spoken about the realities of colonial and post-colonial India. Like most of the Indian English fiction writers of post-independence era Narayan has chosen Indian socio-cultural situations as the themes of the novel. They have also explored the relationship between the east and the west. Fictional reworking of mythology and history has also been rediscovered by him in this period. National identity and national boundary occupy the narrative in most of them. In this juncture, the present paper tries to investigate Narayan's Post-Independence Novels from humanistic point of view.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, Post-Independence, humanistic, Indian English fiction.

Introduction:

In Indian English literature, R.K. Narayan is a prominent writer who is preoccupied with the humanistic approaches in his writings. He began his

career in the 1930s during the heyday of Indian political mobilization and the campaign of civil disobedience against British imperialism. Narayan's life spanned the twentieth century, which meant that he belonged both to an old and new India. In writing his novels R.K. Narayan throughout remains preoccupied with the treatment of social and national issues from a humanistic point of view. His novels which are published after independence delineate the experience of the colonial age and dilemmas of post-independent realities. Here Narayan has more or less spoken about the realities of colonial and post-colonial India. Like most of the Indian English fiction writers of post-independence era Narayan has chosen Indian socio-cultural situations as the theme of the novel. They have also explored the relationship between the east and the west. Fictional reworking of mythology and history has also been rediscovered by him in this period. Humanistic approaches occupy the narrative in most of them. The novels in this period are *Mr. Sampath*, *The Financial Expert*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, *The Painter of Signs*, *A Tiger For Malgudi*, *Talakative Man*, *The World of Nagaraj* and *Grandmother's Tale* where the concept of nation and Humanity takes a prominent place. For an analytical study of the humanistic issues in Narayan's Post-Independence Novels, five novels have been selected for investigation: *Mr. Sampath*, *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The World of Nagaraj*.

Discussion:

Let us start our investigation with *Mr Sampath--The Printer of Malgudi* (1949). The ins and outs of relationships, the falling in love and then experiencing the pain of love are perfectly presented in the novel with Narayan's inimical style of comedy touched with humour and irony. Here, Narayan fictionalizes the Government of India's family planning programme and nationalization of banks and has emphasized the need for the people to be

really educated in good taste. So, here in *Mr. Sampath* we find the old man, the landlord of Srinivas who is “an old widower who tried to earn the maximum money and spend less than ten rupees a month on himself” (Narayan, *Mr. Samapath* 7). The old man “had several sons and daughters, all of them in various prosperous activities all over the country, from the Himalayas down to the South” (Narayan, *Mr. Samapath* 7). After the death of his wife, the old widower “partitioned off the entire house, so that half a dozen families might be lodged in it” (Narayan, *Mr. Samapath* 7). He collects the rent on the second of each month, takes away the entire amount and places it in Saryu Street Post-office Bank and he himself lives in his debtor's house at such a low rent that he can easily stay there for over twenty years working off the loan. It is said that he bathes at the street-tap and feeds himself on cooked rice, which is distributed as charity in a nearby temple. To give justification in living so miserably the old man often remarks: “The true Sanyasi has no need to live on anything more than the leavings of God” (Narayan, *Mr. Samapath* 7). This type of fake-idealist in post-independence India is always the butt of Narayan's satire.

The evil of casteism in post-independence India is critiqued by Narayan in this novel. This is highlighted in Srinivas's negative feeling of casteism and untouchability who believes that these are venomous social curses and are responsible for division of human societies into compartments. In *Mr. Sampath*, there are varieties of female characters like Srinivas' wife, Sampath's wife and Ravi's mother but among them the character of Shanti stands apart representing a modern woman, who challenges to follow a career in order to attain an independent identity in the society which is patriarchal. She has been a wife of a forest officer with whom she terminates her marital relationship due to some differences. That's why she comes to Malgudi to seek a career in a film, leaving her only son in the care of an unknown person in Madras. This background exposes modernity of her outlook. In due course she is successful to acquire the role of a heroine in a movie.

Therefore, it is revealed that in *Mr. Sampath* the Malgudi mode is truly established from a humanitarian view point; the creation of a twentieth-century South Indian town, where a rich variety of people are occupied with mundane occupations, yet influenced, often unconsciously, certainly ironically and tragi-comically, by the ancient conservative values of the Hindu life-style upheld by our ancestors.

The Financial Expert (1952) is Narayan's sixth novel and is considered to be a masterpiece. It is the story of the rise and fall of a financial expert Margayya who, like his other characters, belongs to Malgudi celebrating traditional Hindu values along with the waves of westernization. The novel's background is the time when India has recently achieved Independence which marks Indianization being shadowed by cross-cultural ideas and ways of life. Narayan is interested in the lower middle classes of South-India in a world relatively free from the terrible confusions and agonies, privations, political conflicts and economic depression. He sees South India as a fundamentally conservative Hindu society getting changed under the impact of the western industrialization and modernism

The Financial Expert celebrates the main phase of Narayan's work as a novelist. As Elleke Bohemer has indicated in his book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Narayan joins in this phase other postcolonial writers of the period who "tried to integrate the cultural life of the past with their post-independence, westernized reality" (Bohemer 202). In a materialistic society that results in lots of inconsistencies, Margayya feels insecure about his own position in society and full of self-pity. He knows "that the world treated him with contempt because he had no money" (Narayan, *The Financial Expert* 14). Consumed by the modern desire for wealth and motor-cars, he propitiates goddess Lakshmi and meets Dr. Pal who offers him to become the owner of a pornographic manuscript—"Domestic Harmony". This Dr .Pal, "journalist, correspondent and author" (Narayan, *The Financial*

Expert 63) is the cause of ruin for both Margayya and his son, Balu. The western wind that blows in this British colony brings much change to the rich and ancient cultural heritage of this region.

The farmers who figure in the novel are mostly in need of money and approach the Land Mortgage Cooperative Bank for loans. By and large they are uneducated as they have no knowledge of the by-laws of the Banks, and need Margayya to fill their application forms rather than sign them. The behaviour of the farmers in this novel, thus is a proof of the fact that R.K.Narayan's India of *The Financial Expert* is an India facing the problem of rural poverty and illiteracy. Since there exists no organisation of the farmers in this novel, it is evident that the farmers of Narayan's India in *The Financial Expert* have not made any effort to organise themselves into unions. In other words, Narayan's Malgudi has no organisation to unite the peasants so that they may jointly fight for better economic gains in the market and for a better treatment from the government officials.

Thus, Narayan's presentation of Indian ways of life gets a meticulous and painstaking regard for verisimilitude in *The Financial Expert*. At the centre of the novel is the landscape of India, the customs, conventions and lores that are the quintessence of Indianness. Building up a new nation parallels with searching and adjusting a new identity of an Indian. Narayan's protagonist, in the book, is forced to transcend the age-old customs and traditions of the society and embrace his new identity which he cannot without echoing his own world. Finally he discovers himself and comes back to his root.

The Guide is R.K. Narayan's eighth novel. It narrates the adventure of a railway guide, popularly known as 'Railway Raju'. Raju was born and brought up in Malgudi, the quaint small town which is Narayan's habitual locale. Little Raju found the place very charming. The Railway came to

Malgudi while Raju was a child. Raju's father got a contract for a shop on the platform and "Railway Raju" grew up to be a "part-time shop keeper and full time tourist guide" (Narayan, *The Guide* 59). But Raju was widely popular as tourist guide. The coming of the railway to Malgudi is symbolic of the impact of an industrial and urban society on a predominantly simple, agricultural community with its new problems which would mean the undoing of the old ways of living and the cherished values of life. The tamarind tree which was the seat of Raju's boyhood and of village cartmen who unyoked their bullocks for the night is now full of lorries packed under it—for there is brisk activity because of the laying of the railway track. We see that Raju who grew up in a decent home has now picked up terms of abuse from the railwaymen and the father's words "just my misfortune" (Narayan, *The Guide* 24) sound ominous in the light of the impending disaster. The railway meant the ruining of Raju and his old mother—a small shopkeeper's son becomes a railway guide, starts living by his wits, runs into Rosie and Marco, two tourists, gets emotionally entangled, neglects honest means of making a living, and brings ruin upon himself as well as a married woman.

From the humanitarian point of view *The Guide* not only depicts Indian society, its customs, traditions, culture, ostentations, superstitions and religious faith, but also presents a conflict between the traditional and modern values which are symbolised by Raju's mother and his maternal uncle on the one hand and by Raju and Rosie on the other. The novel also presents "a conflict between the Eastern and Western culture and synthesises the two through their assimilation which has been symbolised by Rosie's transformation into Nalini. Like Anand, Narayan points out that one has to go to the West in order to come back to the East" (Yadav 28). When Raju dissociates himself from society and goes after Rosie, he has moral degradation and he faces unpleasant repercussions. But when he returns to society as a swami he achieves redemption: "Thus, it is seen that in the Western context, the individual can grow and develop, if he dissociates

himself from society and becomes individualistic: whereas in the Indian context if an individual dissociates himself from society, he comes to grief, but if he takes society along with him, then he will be at peace with himself and his surroundings, and will be able to grow and develop” (Soule 33).

Another thing is that *The Guide*, abounds with postcolonial elements. Postcolonial writings are attempts at reviving the ethnic cultures, traditions, beliefs, languages etc. The postcolonial literature inculcates pride in one's own ancient culture and traditions. It abounds in patriotic feelings. Postcolonialism aims at developing the national identity in the wake of colonial rule. Narayan's post-colonialism in *The Guide* is revealed neither through rejection of Westernisation nor through celebration of tradition. In the politics of representation, his position is that of the critical insider who is alive to the need to negotiate the contradictions of the post-colonial predicament. Narayan is not only aware of the inevitability of change, but also of the problems that attend the processes of change in a traditional society. “The interface between traditions and modernity is mediated with characteristic irony. Narayan is interested in looking at the extent to which the cultural life of the past can be viably integrated with the post-independence reality of India” (Sen, Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* 117). To quote Paranjape: “This is how Narayan's novels show Indian society negotiating the complex terrain of the modern. Malgudi, in that sense, becomes a laboratory where various possibilities and positions are tried. *The Guide*, undoubtedly Narayan's best-known novel, as a narrative of modern India . . . is about the nature of an ancient Indian institution, that of the guru, which indeed has no exact English counterpart. R. K. Narayan's use of slightly lighter, slightly more frivolous and certainly more ambiguous word, “Guide,” is therefore telling” (Paranjape 174).

The next novel to be discussed is *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) which depicts the experiences of an Indian sweet vendor, Jagan, the follower of

Mahatma Gandhi in the company of his only son, Mali, who is the product of a culturally hybridized society in postcolonial India. At the very outset of the narrative Jagan is seen belonging to a double space of a syncretised culture. His imitation of Mahatma Gandhi as well as exercising of Gandhian principles without knowing the real depth of this grand 'moral and ethical principle' is nothing but an implication of the whim of both pre and post independence India where it has become a fashion to imitate Gandhi. The ironical presentation of the various activities of Jagan helps to expose his fake practice of Gandhism. We also come across such typical figures in our day to day life. They, in reality, hide their immoral life style under the disguise of Gandhism.

Moreover, with a gentle, unpretentious style and straightforward plotting, Narayan portrays in this novel an ordinary people struggling to make sense of his life as Hindu cultural tradition clashed with modernity and a nascent nationalism eroded a colonial mentality. This novel testifies to Narayan's complex use of the text which projects to some extent, a dialectical structure of values in a postcolonial setting on the light of cross-cultural interactions. Here Narayan tries to unfold how an ordinary individual's naive concept of truth matures from a level of skin-deep perception to a veritable height of realisation.

In his next novel of departure, *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) R. K. Narayan has incorporated his experiences of life and a triple vision of man in relation to himself, his environment and his gods. This novel offers, artistically, an amalgamation of tradition and modernity. The ancient Indian society is "a world of thinkers, a nation of philosophers" (Philip 111). The society which has been portrayed in the novels of R.K. Narayan confirms it. In this novel, too, the characters are presented from different walks of life and they reveal, through actions, their belief in Indian philosophical thought and moral values. India, a nation of great tradition and moral values, has been

depicted here. In the novel, R. K. Narayan has presented the ideal and the real world in juxtaposition. On the one hand through the characters like Nagaraj and Townhall Sanyasi he tries to explore the ideal world as discussed and advised by Indian philosophical schools and on the other hand he unfolds the real world of oddities and menace through the characters like Coomar, Bari and Kavu Pandit. Narayan believes in the concept of transformation from the real to the ideal in the process of his life. This transformation leads one to achieve peace and happiness.

Therefore, it is found that in *The World of Nagaraj* Narayan is accurate in his depiction of an India that is a paradox of binaries--of wealth and squalor, elegance and poverty, beauty and disease, erudition and ignorance--yet he renders Nagaraj's little world to represent the entire big world where we love and strive, unable to realise that we are primarily responsible for our own lives.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is pertinent to say that in R.K. Narayan's post-Independence novels humanistic sensibility has emerged as one of the most significant themes being treated by Narayan in his novels written in this period. References from politics and history, also, occupy a major portion of Narayan's novels written after independence. But, Gandhism and the east-west encounter captivated the attention of Narayan's post- independence novels as vigorously as any other theme. From our investigation it is found that Narayan is a profound lover of humanity; he portrays with sympathy life in Malgudi in all its flaws and frivolities from a comic point of view, laughs and makes his readers laugh at the silly human follies and foibles, for indeed man is a toy in the hands of fate. Narayan's view of life is one of practical wisdom; and he treats human sentimentalism, selfishness, manners and meanness, with sympathy and compassion. Through the social portrait of a single region, Narayan succeeds in presenting the larger picture of Indian

society, both in its general features as well as in its specifically post-independence lineaments. All these contributed to rediscover a nation with all its humanistic sensibilities—which is the prime concern of R.K. Narayan's work.

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