

**CULTURAL REMAKING OF THE SELF IN R.K. NARAYAN'S "A SPACE
ROBLEMATISING IDENTITY"**

Dr. M. Kiruthika, MA., M. Phil., Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor of English,
Devanga Arts College,
Aruppukottai.

In the 1940s, when R.K.Narayan undertook the editorship of the quarterly journal *Indian Thought*, he had the following literary ambition as he reminisces in his autobiography: "He packed all his ambitions into the manifesto, to utilise our culture, through English language as a medium to present our cultural heritage, A score of others. Indian classics and philosophy from Sanskrit and a score of other regional languages... and to encourage original English writing of the highest quality" (Narayan, *My Days*, 153). It is significant that protagonists in Narayan's fiction and his short stories also, in an overt or oblique way, feel an urge – to 'phrase' their 'culture' properly, and this seems to be compatible with their creators, editorial ambition. Incidentally, Narayan's novels turn out to be distinctive culture-texts where the search for identity in the principal characters shows a journey through certain modes of experiences characterized by a tension between the stronghold of tradition and the impacts of modernity.

In fact, the treatment of an individual character in the context of his/her development forms the core of Narayan's 'writerly' attention. Krishna Sen has mentioned what Narayan confessed to William Walsh in a B.B.C. Interview in 1968.

My main concern is with human character – a central human character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights it in his own setting. (Sen, 171).

R.K.Narayan's men and women who populate Malgudi represent the indigenous and appropriated cultures in India. Almost every major character in his fiction and some in his short stories, is seen to be engaged in a quest for indigenous roots and identity and in this way, he/she discovers a distinctive space in the social milieu of Malgudi which reminds us of the Bakhtinian 'chronotope' with a "spatial and temporal connectedness".

This novel testifies to Narayan's treatment of 'family' as an institution, as a vital aspect of Indian Society. 'Family' in Narayan's fiction objectifies the unitary form of life that determines the pattern of life in the community and the society.

In this context, one may quote what Meenakshi Mukherjee has said about the role of [joint] family in Indian English Fiction. Taking a cue from Narayan's disapproval of the 'eternal triangle' as a theme, Mukherjee writes in her book *The Twice – born Fiction*.

His daughter's school seems to Krishnan an epitome of a created universe of pure, unmixed joy based on the traditional system of education where the creation of environment makes learning an automatic activity instead of a pedagogic performance.

In his autobiography *My Day (1999)*, R.K.Narayan has categorically told that the circumstances in which Krishnan's wife died and the consequence psychic communion between the husband and the spirit of his dead wife correspond to the writer's real life experiences. In the context of Indian philosophy and mysticism, the transmigration of human souls through generations, the supreme pre-occupation of spiritualism concentrating on the elimination of self which restricts one's view of personality.

The entire fictional oeuvre of Narayan is taken into account; we notice that the sense of search in the characters is not merely referable to a strictly social concept of roots and identity. On the basis of recent literary studies of Narayan that locate certain disturbing spaces of socio-familial problematization in some of Narayan's post-Independence novels, it is noticeable that the search in the character(s) here offers a sub-text for a parallel quest for transcendence and truth.

Again, observance of fasting as a ritual for invocation of rain is not a rarity in Indian tradition and interestingly enough, Narayan in his autobiography *My Days*, mentions a similar fast that was intended successfully to bring rain to a drought-stricken place and he admits that this experience acted as the starting point of his novel *The Guide*.

In *The Vendor of Sweets (1967)*, Jagan's experiences show an arduous progress of realization through the mazes of cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. Jagan's Gandhism serves to posit his character within the stronghold of tradition/ideology whereas Mali, his son, is an instance of extreme individualism which is a pronounced Western trait. Mali's ways of life have only a shattering effect on Jagan who, notwithstanding his lack of critical and intellectual self-awareness of the Gandhian ideology.

Though 'short story' as a genre reserves some sort of specificity or the other and some limitations as well with regard to the communication of an impression within a short compass, Narayan's short stories too, like his novels, project to a fair extent the value-systems and norms existing in traditional Indian society. It is a fact that Narayan borrows the form and style from the West, but his short stories correspond to the very spirit of indigenous tradition of oral story telling that entails a rich heritage of usage since the clime of the epics and the *puranas*.

In the credible literary universe called Malgudi, all kinds of people (particularly of middle and the lower-middle class) belonging to every nook and corner of the town, are drawn in full colour and endearing domestic detail and under the Midas' touch of the writer's imagination, the whole imaginary locale springs to life, revealing the essence of India and of human experience. The stories reflect a brilliant world which is "neither an Elysium nor a vale of tears."

The experiences of the characters can be typologically cast into certain categories. Stories like "The Hero", "The Regal" and "Father's Help" with Swaminathan as the protagonist, deal with childhood extravaganza that can fit into Narayan's first novel *Swami and Friends*.

Stories like “An Astrologer’s Day”, “Mother and Son”, “Missing Mail” show in irony of circumstances with an ‘O’ Henry – like twist to a happy ending. Though presenting the traditional motif of practicing astrology as a calling a “An Astrology’s Day”.

Narayan shows an encyclopedic range of interest in the choice of themes as a story-writer. He treats serious themes such as the spiritual faith in India (“A Snake in the Grass”), communication-gap (“A Horse and Two Goats”), generation- gap (‘Nitya’) and even the post-47 uncritical and utopian urge for relocation of nationhood bordering on farce (“Lawley Road”) – but all the time he examines his themes through his tolerant yet comic-ironic vision.

In the story “A Snake in the Grass”, an old beggar cries for aims at the gate of a house and she is told not to disturb the members of the house who were busy in a snake-hunt. The beggar calls the family as a fortunate one as, according to her, the snake was none other than an incarnation of Lord Subramanya Swami and it should better be spared for the cause of familial welfare. The beggar woman’s counsel serves as a reminder to the mother of the house of a forgotten promise of observing a custom called *Abhishekam* years ago and she prepares to do the penance. Again, in stories like “Attila” and “The Blind Dog”, readers find how the writer’s love for subhuman creatures (which is a salient feature of the great Indian tradition) can be used to create a moment’s monument of psychological exploration and keen observation.

Narayan uses symbolism as an effective literary strategy in many of his stories like “Naga”. In this story, a young boy is abandoned by his father and forced to carry on his *britti*, the family trade of snake charming, performing with Naga, the cobra his father has left behind. Crisis occurs when Naga, now old and tired, becomes a burden to the boy. The boy tries vainly to rid himself of Naga by setting it free, near an anthill. But right then a *garuda* (an eagle), the arch-enemy of snakes, appears in the sky. On a momentum impulse to save weak and lethargic Naga, the boy dashes with the basket and seeing the basket, “Naga slithered back into it as if coming home after a strenuous public performance” (Narayan. *Malgudi Days*, 154). The snake’s incapacity for independent survival leads to the boy’s realization of the impossibility of this personal freedom at the cost of the dependent’s life. Naga becomes to the boy a symbol of ‘family’, a greater bond of kinship, the vital aspect of tradition that demands the sacrifice of individual choice for a greater cause.

Prof. Venugopal thinks that in his short stories, “Narayan seems to have shut himself up against certain disturbing yet very real elements of life such as the death of beloved, Such as the death of his blood relations and dear ones, The loss of honour or intolerable thing for him.

The present study includes four prominent novels of R.K.Narayan, two each from the colonial and the post-colonial period of Narayan’s writing career and some of his prominent short stories, where the principal characters are seen to be actively engaged in exploring distinctive modes of survival, a space for belonging, a set of values that they can rely on. What is important to note is that, they find a space for identity only after a fair measure of cultural appropriation of the West and thereby discovering their niche in the matrix of the timeless and surviving aspects of their indigenous cultural variations – history, religion, social heritage, tradition, family distribution sanctioned by myth, rituals (both rural and folkloric), spiritualism, and in a word philosophy – all in turn affirming an intricate social awareness in the context of an Indian sensibility.

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