



THE MANIFESTATION POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES IN R.K.NARAYAN'S NOVELS

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Abstract

*The chief tone of R.K.Narayan's fictional universe is considered comical, although this comic vision fully interprets philosophical facets of Indian culture and civilization. One of the celebrated novelists of 20th century India, Narayan's creative genius seems committed to national ethics and Gandhian perspectives. Some of his novels had been published during the post-1980 period. His novels like *A Tiger For Malgudi* (1983), *World of Nagraj* (1990) are considered postmodern texts. Narayan belonged to earlier generation of the Indian Writing in English who not only witnessed the decline of colonial governance but also experienced the status of democratic nation. Hence, his creative span almost covers the entire 20th century in which he represents a variety of themes voicing modern as well as postmodern perspectives in its vivid forms. Some of the features of modernism retained its status even in postmodernism. To judge the fixed criterions and particular phase to define modernism and postmodernism is rather an awkward exercise. Some of the facets or techniques employed by postmodern novelists like magical realism, the cultural encounter between the East and the West, historiographic metafiction, erosion of moral values, changing standards, spread of corruption, reflexivity and self-consciousness are fully evident in Narayan's fictional Malgudi milieu. This paper examines the such postmodern perspectives observed especially in Narayan's novels: *The English Teacher*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, *The Guide* and *The Man-eater of Malgudi*.*



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R.K. Narayan was one of the leading figures of Indian writing in English. Graham Greene appreciates Narayan's brilliance in his Introduction to the novel *The Bachelor of Arts* in the following words:

"There are writers - Tolstoy and Henry James to name two - whom we hold in awe,...for whom we feel a personal affection...Narayan (whom I don't hesitate to name in such a context) more than any of them wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for who has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian".

In his fictitious Malgudi milieu, Narayan favoured the native culture and disapproved certain limits enforced by colonial rule. His works had been published both in England and USA. He is regarded next only to Faulkner and Graham Greene in America. His creative career lasted for almost seven decades. Narayan's humour is treated humour of health. Narayan himself says '.....laughter should be dignified and refreshing rather than demonstrative'. ()

The colonial ambiance might have left its influence on Narayan but he has preferred the English language in its Indianized form. In one of his interviews with William Walsh Narayan justifies his writings in English: "I was never aware that I was \using a different, a foreign language when I wrote in English, because it came to me very easily. I can't explain how English is a very adaptable language. And it's so transparent it can take on the tint of any country" (Walsh 7). Narayan's English is designed with the Indian context and native colour, not the language of the rulers. Narayan's use of English and the symbolic adherence to mythical truth in reflecting the indigenous nature of India indirectly validates the postmodern politic "think globally and act locally".

Malgudi: the fictional, semi-urban town is the chosen land by R. K. Narayan. Malgudi is the backdrop of his fictions and through the eyes of this region Narayan's characters are developed, assessed and pass through trials of life. This region offers the author a sort of familiar confinement to base his fiction. Through Malgudi Narayan achieves universality. The portrayal of this region has its general as well as specific appeal. William Walsh very appropriately remarks that Narayan's Malgudi novels are regional but not parochial.(Walsh, p. 7) Regionality is already woven facet in Narayan's novel, but mere limiting it to Malgudi province would be an act of unjust because his characters are seen crossing those regional boundaries and extend the said limitations to generalize their impression. To that extent, his vision has universal appeal. The Washington Post notes: "R.K.Narayan's Malgudi is a metaphor, not of India, but of the world" (*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* 1). It can be symbolized as the ideal specimen of urban and rural culture.

The chief tone of R. K. Narayan's fictional universe is considered comical but this comic vision fully interprets philosophical facets of Indian culture and civilization. One of the celebrated novelists of 20th century, Narayan's creative genius seems committed to national ethics and Gandhian perspectives. Some of his novels had been published during the post-1980 period. His novels like *A Tiger For Malgudi*(1983), *World of Nagraj* (1990) are considered postmodern texts. Narayan belonged to earlier generation of the Indian Writing in English who witnessed the decline of colonial governance and rise of democratic nation.

Hence, his creative span covered almost the entire 20th century in which he represents a variety of themes voicing modern as well as postmodern perspectives in its vivid forms.

Some of the features of modernism have retained its status even in postmodernism. To judge the fixed criteria and particular phase to define modernism and postmodernism is rather an awkward exercise. Some of the facets or techniques employed by postmodern novelists like Magical Realism, the Cultural Encounter between the East and the West, intertextuality, Historiographic Metafiction, Declining Moral Standards and Spread of Corruption, reflexivity and self-consciousness are fully evident in Narayan's fictional Malgudi milieu.

The concept magical realism introduced mainly by Rushdie, has been represented by Narayan through integrating myth with reality in a contemporary context. In the field of literary studies, the term magical realism has faced contradictory attitudes. Some critics opine it as 'a literary language of the emergent postcolonial world' as well as consider it 'a little more than a brand name for exoticism'. While employing this technique the narrator introduces certain incredible or impracticable elements into a narrative that is otherwise normal. Narayan's *A Tiger For Malgudi* is basically an autobiography of a tiger who is portrayed just more than a tiger. Growing out of his days as a wild beast suddenly gets confronted by human beings. The tiger views human beings as puny and unintelligent, till one fine day he is caught for a circus. The novel enters in a new phase wherein tiger's wild nature disappears after his meeting with a swamiji. The tiger perceives human beings with respect and starts getting influenced by the swamiji. Both swamiji and tiger converse the philosophical discourse over a variety of subjects with each other. This comes true as swamiji possess Yogic power to perform any task. Narayan finds a resemblance between the consciousness of a tiger and the consciousness of a human being. Narayan's seem to unify the rational and irrational facets harmoniously to mirror the Indian reality.

In a theoretical sense it is impossible for the animal to peep into the human affairs and interpret. It comes true only in literary speaking where artist personifies such concept. To that sense the novel depicts the technique of magic realism. As Delbaere-Garant comments, "[a]s is generally the case in magic realism we are not offered any explanation of events and the calm distancing of the narrative voice makes us forget the implausibility of the strange happenings" (Zamora & Faris 258) It is very difficult for the reader to what extent he can accept that even an animal can repent over his killings and appreciates Yoga and eternity. The reader to this sense is convinced to suspend his skepticism almost in the beginning of the

novel. Narayan constructs the comic world through his artistic sense gradually wherein reader would have the freedom to accept the incredible.

You are not likely to understand that I am different from the tiger next door, that I possess a soul within this forbidding exterior. I can think, analyse, judge, remember and do everything that you do, perhaps with greater subtlety and sense. I lack only the faculty of speech. (*A Tiger For Malgudi* 11-12)

Narayan himself states in an introduction' to this novel that "man assumes he is all-important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment." The characters shown into a form of human being seem to manipulate the natural world. The novelist has defined the egocentricity of man in a symbolic manner. Narayan also adds the philosophy over seeking the self: "Who is he? Where is he from?" are naturally the questions that occur to everyone. But whenever he is asked who are you? He just says 'what I am trying to find out'? This sounds like a mere metaphysical quibble but it is a plain, literal answer to the question. When one is seized within a passion to understand one's self, one has to leave behind all normal life and habitual modes of thought. One becomes an ascetic; the terms *sanyasi*, *sadhu*, *yogi*, or *swamiji* indicate more or less the same state (*A Tiger For Malgudi* 8-9).

Narayan's personal experiences, rather suffering have been transformed into his novel *The English Teacher* (1945). The novel narrates the domestic life of Krishna, a lecturer in English at the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. His wife Sushila is stung by a flea develops typhoid and dies after few days. The death of his dear wife makes him so upset that he loses all interest in life. The only comfort and compromise to him is his little daughter: Leela. Wondering about a lotus pond, he meets Sanyasi who has the ability to communicate with the spirit of his dead wife. Here, Narayan focuses on Para-psychology and the mysteries of the world of spirit. Krishna regains his interest in life and meets the head master of a new children school. Impressed by his educational theories, Krishna soon gives up his job in the college to serve the new institution. That very night he can commune with the spirit of his wife directly. The philosophical reading of Krishna's communication with his dead wife can be judged as neither magic nor miracle but actually a means of finding reconciliation with life. Narayan has woven his theme around Hindu myths and legends. The concept of mortality of human body and the immortality of the soul is reflected in the second part of *The English Teacher*. Krishna could accomplish the stage to self-sufficiency and find happiness within. He thinks that his wife is with him forever. Narayan writes: "Perhaps death may not be the end of everything as it seems – personality may have other structures and other planes

of existence, and the decay of the physical body through disease or senility may mean nothing more than a change of vehicle. This outlook may be unscientific but it helped me survive the death of my wife. I could somehow manage to live after death” (*My Days*, p.151). Here, the evocation of a spiritual world can be treated a magic realism. The approach symbolized by Narayan doesn't seem traditionalist mythical style. The narrative on no account shifts from a modern context towards an eternal one. In addition to this such magic experience offers its protagonist sufficient scope to render political and social criticism. Thus, in *The English Teacher*, Hinduism and Indian society are viewed with a magic realist strategy that also serves a tool for criticism. Narayan seems to envisage the modern world through a mythical image to represent dynamic image of Hinduism.

The postmodern perspectives like Cultural Encounter between the East and the West, declining moral standards and spread of corruption, reflexivity and self-consciousness which are fully evident in Narayan's fictional *Malgudi* milieu. The cultural encounter between the East and the West is vividly illustrated by Narayan in *The English Teacher*, *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *The Vendor of Sweets*.

Life under colonial rule plays a key role in the novel *The English Teacher*. The title of the novel itself suggests the influence of the unwelcomed ruler. Towards the end of the novel Krishna realizes that his job as an English Teacher is worthless. Krishna believes that English teaching to Indian students is like to feed them on 'literary garbage' and the fate of English Teacher in India is like 'the paid servants of the department of garbage' (171). He decides to resign as English Teacher because colonial system of education is going to attack a whole century of false education (205). Krishna feels that English education has proved ineffective in bringing him solace at the time when required. He realizes that such education has actually placed him far from Indian culture and its education. It is Krishna's inner self-development. Though he praises the aesthetic value of English literature and has high respect for Mr. Brown: the principal of Albert Mission College and well-known poet but his opposition towards the British Education is somewhat different when he says that his (Mr. Brown) western mind will not be able to grab the idea of inner peace in the Indian sense. It seems that Narayan through Krishna's character shows how the English education system dehumanizes the Indians.

Margavya, the protagonist in *The Financial Expert* is shown versatile. His only business is to collect money as money seems everything to him. His materialistic approach represents colonial outlook: "It is money which gives people all this (authority, dress, looks). Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have

money in our purse” (21). In one of his dialogues with the Priest, Margayya shows his strong passion for money and tries to convince the superior power of the wealth over the rest: “A man whom the Goddess of Wealth favours need not worry much. He can buy all the knowledge he requires” (51) but the same Margayya teaches his son Balu to prostrate before Goddess Saraswati. Margayya has secured a small framed picture of the Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of learning and enlightenment, sitting beside her peacock and playing on the strings of veena. The picture is hung up in the study room where Margayya enjoins his son ceremoniously to pray to the Goddess every morning. When his son discovers the fact that Margayya is fond of worshipping Lakshmi instead of Saraswati, Margayya very tactfully answers to avoid further misinterpretation: “It is all the same Goddess. There is no difference between Lakshmi and Saraswati, do you understand?” (113) Hence, his inner soul cannot escape from the inherent Sankaras earned since centuries where learning is functioned as a pious form. The clash between spiritualistic and materialistic mind-set in some way imply the encounter between Eastern and Western culture.

Narayan portrays Rosie’s impressive performance as a professional Bharat Natyam dancer in *The Guide* which can be considered obviously a postcolonial phenomenon. Bharat Natyam is a part of the national heritage in post-independence India. Raju’s confirmation of sainthood by fasting for bringing rain to the famine-stricken region defines the reality located in Indian culture. Raju unwillingly accepts the role of a saint but his fasting serves as a means of self-purification through which Narayan focuses Gandhian Philosophy: ‘Suffering for the welfare of others where the dignity of life lies’. Raju desires to prove a search for the true identity. B. S. Yadav in an article on *The Guide- A Psycho-Philosophic and Socio-Ethical Study* states that “the novel presents a conflict between the Eastern and the Western culture and synthesizes the two through their assimilation which has been symbolized by Rosie’s transformation into Nalini and like Anand, Narayan points out that one has to go to the West in order to come back to the East” (Bhatnagar 28). Raju’s mother symbolizes the traditional values while Rosie and Raju remains the representative to modernity. Through Raju’s character the novelist has also satirized another aspect of hypocrisy that there are many fake Sadhus who misguide the innocent people in the name of religion, but ultimately remain the victim of their misfortune. The features of modernity are a part of the Indian reality as delineated in the novel. For example: the arrival of the train in Malgudi and ‘the palace’ where film featuring Dietrich, Garbo, Laurel and Hardy are regularly screened. S.P. Swain in an article on *The novels of R.K.Narayan and Indian Reality* remarks that for Narayan, reality is a unity where there is no intrinsic and fundamental schism between its constituent parts.

(Bhatnagar 17) The novelist has shown religion and faith as linked to social and economic conditions. Natural disasters, famines or social tensions cause people to return to their faith. Hence, the novel is mirror to Indian tradition, culture, superstitions and spiritual vision.

The character of Jagan depicted in *The Sweet Vendor* emphasizes the Gandhian philosophy representing Indian ideology on the contrary his spoiled son Mali symbolizes the western culture discarding the age-old values. The clash between the two cultures ultimately generates the disorder. Similarly, Nataraj in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* favours the non-violence observing the religious norms cited in Holy Scriptures while H. Vasu: the taxidermist is the product of money-oriented world. He represents the mythical character Bhasmasur who destroyed himself. Narayan favours the sayings from Bhagvat Gita: *Yatodharmahstatojayh* (where there is a religion, there is a triumph) Natraj tries to harmonize the tradition with modernity as he prints books, saves innocent creatures like elephant as well as organizes temple festivals to celebrate the marriage of Radha and Krishna and preserves nuclear family.

Jagan, the sweet vendor does not eat beef because cow is worshipped and treated a sacred animal in Hindu culture: “The shastra defined the five deadly sins and the killing of a cow headed the list” (57). It is prohibited in sermons. Slaughtering of cow is considered a sin since Vedic culture. Swami of *Swami and Friends* condemns Jesus for being non-vegetarian. He is of the opinion that an ideal Brahmin should purely be a vegetarian. Sriram of *Waiting for the Mahatma* remarks: “I have not even eaten cakes because they contain eggs” (195) He as a pious soul never eats meat or eggs nor drinks alcohol. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* shows his true Brahminic identity. When he is offered alcohol by Kailas, he rejects the proposal soon: “I made a vow never to touch alcohol in my life, before my mother” (98). These words even affected Kailas deeply and soon he realizes the importance of mother in one’s life: “As long as my mother lived she said every minute ‘Do this. Don’t do that.’ And I remained a good son to her. The moment she died I changed. It is a rare commodity, sir. Mother is a rare commodity” (99). Sriram’s Granny does not prefer to seat on a canvas chair because she believes that canvas is made of leather, perhaps of the cow-hide (20). Natraj observes non-violence in a strictest sense. He is frustrated with Vasu’s slaughtering of innocent animals in *The Men-eater of Malgudi*. He claims: “I had been brought up in a house where we were taught never to kill” (60) Natraj remains the protector as well as promoter of value system ingrained in Indian philosophical thought.

The ritual of ‘Saptapadi’ (where bride and bridegroom take an oath ‘made for each-other, never to depart’ till the last breath of life in witness of Fire-God and parents) remains the indispensable part of Indian value system. Though, living together in friendship or

relationship without conducting marriage is a modern concept but Narayan's concern is in preserving the age-old values of Indian civilization. Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* keeps the Americanised girl, Grace without performing the marriage ceremony, but his father, Jagan is not ready to permit such wicked joining together. He opines that "I can't understand how two young persons can live together like this without being married, I feel my home is tainted now, I find it difficult to go back there"(137). Chandran, the protagonist of Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*, seems the product of modern age too, who compares and contrasts the life in two cultures (the Eastern and the Western). He shows his contempt by viewing the rigidity of Indian people and favouring the liberty of White people: "The white fellows are born to enjoy life. Our people really don't know how to live. If a person is seen with a girl by his side, a hundred eyes stare at him and a hundred tongues comment, whereas no European ever goes out without taking a girl with him." (15)

The term intertextuality coined by Julia Kristeva defines two axes, a vertical one connecting the text to the other texts and a horizontal one connecting the author and the reader of that text (Kristeva 69). 'Intertextuality' one of the important elements of postmodernism offers the acknowledgement of previous literary works. Some of his real life experiences are mirrored in his novels. Here is the survey of intertextuality that is operated between the two texts i.e. it has been framed by Narayan into vertical axis form which manifests certain textual reality. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* narrates the life of boys in South Indian schools. Ebenzer: a fanatic Christian teacher makes a dirty comment on Hindu Gods. Swami cannot tolerate the Christian missionary operating against Hinduism and loves to leave the school in protest, "I do not care for your dirty school" (18). The question "Why was Christ crucified if he was much better than Krishna? (4) asked by Swami seems Narayan's strict response to colonial representative advocating mere blaming against Hindu Gods. The chapter 'Monday Morning' vividly draws the picture of school-going children in Indian education system. Though, little children do not prefer to attend school initially as it put a ceiling on their childhood pleasure. Certain authoritarian atmosphere in the school generates mental fear over their delicate mentality: "Swaminathan shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class-teacher; and the headmaster with his thin ling cane...."(1). Narayan in a speech on 'Cruelty to Children' to Indian Parliament indicates certain changes in Indian schooling system. The Macaulay made educational frame has been proved mechanical to some extent where children are forced to wear particular uniform, footwear and number of others things. Narayan notes in his speech that the 'child is groomed and stuffed into a uniform and

packed off to school with a loaded bag on his back. The schoolbag has become an inevitable burden for the child'. Narayan pleads for abolition of the school bag as a national policy, by an ordinance if necessary. He further clarifies that 'the dress regulation particularly in convent school is another senseless formality- tie and laced shoes and socks, ... it's absurd to enforce it on children...'. (Krishnan 197-98). Through the character sketches of Swami and his friends in the novel, Narayan seems protesting the British legacy of education system and appeals certain improvement as per native set up and environment. Narayan has described his experiences at Lutheran Mission School as a Brahmin boy in his autobiography *My Days*:

“The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus. Among the non-Christians in our class I was the only Brahmin boy and received special attention; the whole class would turn in my direction when the teacher said that Brahmins claiming to be vegetarians ate fish and meat in secret, in a sneaky way and were responsible for the soaring price of those commodities”(My Days, p.10).

Hence, the novel is frankly autobiographical and it owes much of its realism and authenticity to the fact that it is rooted in Narayan's personal experience as a boy to school. The novel may also be termed as the quest for identity and maturity.

Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* expresses his clash against the injustice, slavery or distortion of Indian history by the colonial rule. Chandran shows his likeness for the pure image of India and the history of patriots as the makers of India in place of distorted history by the colonial rule. Raghavachar, the nationalist professor of history expresses his views: “If he were asked what the country needed most urgently, he would not say self government or economic independence but a classified, purified Indian history”(19). To support this argument, Narayan mentions in one of his essays titled as ‘When India was a Colony’: “Indian history was written by British historians – extremely well documented and researched, but not always impartial. History had to serve its purpose ... The Black Hole of Calcutta never existed. Various Muslim rulers who invaded and proselytized with fire and sword were proved to have protected and endowed Hindu temples. When I mentioned this aspect to a distinguished British historian some years ago in London, he brushed aside my observation with: ‘I’m sorry, Indians are without a sense of history. Indians are temperamentally non-historical” (*Malgudi Landscapes* 343)

Similarly Krishna in *The English Teacher* shows his dissatisfaction towards English education system “This education had reduced us to a notion of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage” (171) To justify his views, Narayan further notes in his essay ‘When India was a Colony’ the influence and attitudes of ICS (now IAS) officer during colonial phase: “Instead of taking the trouble to understand India and deal directly with the public, Briton transmuted Indians themselves into Brown Sahibs. After a period of training at Oxford and Cambridge, first class men were recruited for the Indian Civil Service... They were also educated to carry about them an air of superiority at all times and were expected to keep other Indians at a distance....the ICS manuals was his Bible that warned him against being too familiar with anyone...” (*Malgudi Landscapes*, p. 338)

The attempt of rereading and reinterpreting of Narayan’s novels with multiple approaches will certainly invite various issues to generate new knowledge. The reassessment of Narayan’s fictional world will offer new perspectives in the realm of literary criticism. His creativity cannot be restricted under fixed phase. One can also observe the facet of timelessness already woven within his entire imaginative frame. As Roland Barthes rightly justifies the concept of text: “A text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, bland and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture...” (Barthes 146).

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