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A Study of Indianness in R.K. Narayan's Short Stories

Mr. Amar Kumar

Researcher, Department of English, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar
University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India.

Abstract

Indo-Anglian literature is the window through which the people of the world can peep in India to know what really it is. The Indo-Anglian writers of fiction write with an eye and hope on the western readers. R.K. Narayan is not only a novelist but also a short story writer. In his novels and short stories Indianness, nationalism and patriotism and glorification of India's past can be vividly observed. R.K. Narayan was a prolific Indian writer whose stories and novels provide witty and perceptive observations about Indian culture and society. He received the Sahitya Akedemi Award for *The Guide* in 1958.

Keywords

Indianness; R.K. Narayan; Short Stories.

More than any other literary form, the short story is a ready and easily available barometer of human experience, that is the reason enough for its popularity. Short story is a kind of prose fiction. It may be defined as a prose

narrative requiring half an hour to one hour for its perusal. In other words, brevity is the key note of a short story. Narayan was a prolific Indian writer whose stories and novels provided witty and perceptive observations about life in India. He has published numerous novels, five collections of short stories, two travel books, four collections of essays, a memoir and some translations of Indian myths and epics. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Guide* in 1958.

Narayan had written five collections of short stories. Some of them are *Lawley Road*, *An Astrologer's Day and Other stories*, *A Horse and Two Goats*, and *Malgudi Days*. *Malgudi Days*, a collection of thirty two short stories in which the author portrays an astrologer, a snake-charmer, a postman, a vendor, relation between father and son, a blind man, dogs, cobbler and all kinds of people drawn in full colour and domestic details. All the characters have been taken from different norms of our society. He gets the Indian characters completely with all their superstitious appreciation of life, its guilelessness, its dazing inconsistencies and its mocking comic incongruity. The imaginary town of Malgudi springs to life, revealing the essence of India and of human experience. Malgudi plays a vital role in Narayan's work. Malgudi is his Wessex. He can be compared to Hardy in this respect. Malgudi is the main character in his books which changes, yet the progressions that happen in Malgudi are the progressions that are occurring in the nation in general. Consistent with Srinivasa Iyengar: "Malgudi is Narayan's Casterbridge, however, the occupants of Malgudi - despite the fact that they might have their conspicuous nearby trappings - are basically human, and consequently have their family relationship with all humankind. In this sense Malgudi is everywhere" (360).

R.K. Narayan's *A Horse and Two Goats* has memorable characters like Muni and Annamalai, typically Indian in their nature and behaviour. It also brings out Narayan's compassionate realism and innate feeling for justice and sense of humour at its best. It is about an elderly, poor man, Muni, with two goats, a wife, little money and no children. He used to have a herd of forty goats, numerous sheep and even a few cows. Hard luck has reduced him down to two

scraggly goats. He and his wife live in a small very minimal house next to a “drumstick tree”.

Narayan used Indian symbols to present an authentic picture of India. He has used the symbols like temple, river, village caves, snakes, beggars etc. to present an authentic picture of Indian life and not to pander to the expectations of the western world. He has also used typical Indian characters - Swami, Guru Nayak, Shanta, Ramu, Kamala, Rama, Velan etc. are Indians not only in names but also in character and spirit. They have the notions and feelings, taboos and morals of Indian with them. They suffer due to Indian traditions and morals. Narayan’s characters share Indianness. Their excessive credulity and faith symbolize the cultural past of India.

He has used a great number of Indian words. Some of them are - *circar* (government), *dakhsina* (fee), *dhobi* (wesherman), *jilebi*, *bhaj*, *bhajan* (song), *chappati*, *namaste*, *lathi*, *kurta*, *dhoti*, *muhurtam*, *pandal*, *puja*, *sadhu*, *rasagulla*, *swarya loka*, *sanyasi*, *thali*, *sowcar* (businessman), *paisa*, *Bah!*, *beedi*, *almirah*, *karma*, *sarayu*, *tonga*.

In “An Astrologer’s Day”, Narayan reveals Indians’ faith on fate. They were attracted to astrologers to know their fate as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. The story revolves around an astrologer in Malgudi, who was as much a stranger to stars as were his innocent customers. Yet, he is able to make a living out of his business, by saying things which astonished people, by shrewd guesswork. He is able to predict the future of people or rather make sensible guesses, using his sharp acumen and psychological intellect. So far, he has been successful. Random comments such as “you are not getting the fullest results of your efforts” or “most of your troubles are due to your nature” have been proved easy excuses to put people off the track, and they usually left the astrologer’s corner, immensely pleased with his sharp insight and good natured advice, forgetting their real purpose for coming to him. However, the day to which events of this particular story are based upon, prove to be difficult and quite unpredictable for the all-knowing astrologer.

Narayan's Indianness is best seen in his treatment of credulous and superstitious villagers of India. Narayan's imaginative orientation is deeply rooted in Indian culture. He has made a frank use of Indian superstitions and religious belief ceremonies, customs, etc., in his works. These traditional rituals, beliefs and superstitions not only create an authentic picture of Indian life, but also contribute to the effective communication of experience.

When compared to the language of other Indo-Anglian short story writers - Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Khushwant Singh etc., the language of R.K. Narayan is watery and un-metaphorical. His language has very little ornamentation; it is suitable to the purpose and occasion. Stability, adaptability, flexibility and aptness are the hall-mark of his language.

Narayan uses pure and limpid English, easy and natural in its run and tone but always an evolved conscious medium. Narayan's language is beautifully adapted to communicate a different, an Indian sensibility. Other main features of Narayan's English are simplicity, straight forwardness and brevity and propriety. Although impact of journalism is there on Narayan's English, yet it is not journalistic. It has a different colour altogether. For the communication of Indian sensibility, Narayan's language is most suited. It is extracted from context history, social conditions, weather, racial memory etc. He is not interested in politics. He is away from the naturalistic mode of expression and photographic representation of reality. He creates fantasies and uses his language to depict his understanding of the fundamentals of life.

He uses a language fit for his characters. Many of his heroes and heroines are common men and women. He uses a language appropriate to their standard. He doesn't use slang or terms of abuse. His language is free from character to character. It is almost uniform but sometimes it differs when a character speak in emotion or sentiment.

R.K. Narayan, a first rate story teller is well known for his unique style of narration. His use of the English language is characterized by a rare felicity of expression and a smooth unhurried pace. He portrays all kinds of characters

taken from different norms of Indian society. His language also reflects Indian sensibility. He uses a great number of Indian words directly in English language.

There are some of the various ways which reflect Narayan's India and his Indianness. He has depicted Indian life realistically and vividly, with an occasional merry twinkle in his eyes at the follies and foibles of his people. He has the force of the typical Indian story-teller because he draws upon the Indian story-teller's resources - the epic tales and epic heroes of ancient Hindu mythology, religion and epics. He himself says that one cannot write a novel without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, astrologers, pundits and devadasis. Agnihotri has rightly pointed out that Narayan “draws his strength from an inexhaustible source - Indianness ... His view of life and his world of values are basically Indian” (92). He has described Indian life and the Indian people with a rare detachment, without trying to moralize or give his personal views.

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