

Gastronomical Study of R K Narayan's Select Fiction and Short Story

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Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Narayanaswami (1906-2001) is better known as R.K. Narayan this change was done on Graham Green's suggestion then his name has been contracted R.K. Narayan. He is one of the prominent writers in Indian Writing in English in 1930s. He was born in Madras (today's Chennai) later he spent most of his life in Mysore, Karnataka. Certainly, there is no need to give any introduction to him and he is as famous as any acclaimed writer, not only in India but also outside of India too. In fact, his name was nominated for Noble Prize once and he rightly deserved it and he was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1980. As a Rajya Sabha member for six years his only concern was about school children's learning burden and the plight of school children, especially the heavy load of school books. R.K. Narayan's personal life and his association with other prominent personalities give some more insights about what a humane writer he is.

This paper would like to attempt to study some of the gastronomical aspects in his selected works. Before going to his fictional world knowing about his personal life a bit is better and it gives some more insights for the eternal spirit of his enquiry. From the beginning R.K. Narayan was an introvert person he was a man of words who mostly confined to writing and walking he used to make time for these two things. Writing was his vocation and avocation for his entire life. He was a teacher for a brief time that didn't suit for his maverick personality and he resigned for his job. He decided to be a writer for rest of his life. Moreover, it was challenging thing to take up freelancing reporter job that time it was a rare thing unlike today it is one of the lucrative options anybody can choose but those days were very challenging to take up writing as a career. R.K. Narayan was adventurous enough to take up a small time freelancer reporting job in *The Hindu*. His beginning was so humble like another great English novelist Charles Dickens both the writers have lot of similarities like: They are known for their realistic writing and both started their career as self styled journalists and ended up as successful novelists in their respective countries.

R.K. Narayan's writing in 1930s was an humble beginning his first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) was set in British India in a fictional town called Malgudi it is one of the famous fictional town ever created by any Indian writer in English and later two more stories were included; *Malgudi Days* and *Under the Banyan Tree*. These same stories were adapted by

Kannada famous actor Shankar Nag into the television serial popularly known as Malgudi Days in 1986. Entire imaginary Malgudi was created at Agumbe, in Thirthalli taluk, Karnataka. The famous musician L. Vaidyanathan composed music and R.K. Laxman, legendary cartoonist sketched cartoons. R.K. Narayan's writing in the initial stage was not cake walk his first novel *Swami and Friends* was rejected by many publishers but later it was published on the recommendation of Gram Green and that one step facilitation made R.K. Narayan as a literary giant today. From the general introduction to specific works of R.K. Narayan brings more insights for further intellectual discussions. R.K. Narayan has written extensively, and his unique style, simple language and selections of topics are special in its own way. In fact, some of the critics they have criticized him for simple language especially Shashi Tharoor once commented that R.K. Narayan's writing is as simple as anything and it is almost like translation work in a review of his *The Grandmother's Tale* in the New York Times. Later, Shashi Tharoor recreated and also acknowledged in his famous non-fiction *Bookless in Baghdad*, Tharoor apologies with a separate chapter called *R.K. Narayan's Comedies of Suffering*.

R.K. Narayan serialized his first few novels; *Swami and Friends*, *Bachelor of Arts*, *Dark Room* and *The English Teacher* and he used to infuse his novels with lot of things which were around him. As a writer he was a keen observer and he was known as a legendary walker among his family and friends circle. He used to walk from his home Yadavagiri house to in and around Mysore and then he used to create his fictional world Malgudi. Though most of his writing used to be day today's life's crisis like family, school and small social issues instead of concentrating on freedom movement or any such ideology oriented lenience. His writing period falls in both pre-Independence and post-Independent context, but he didn't show any such great interest towards the freedom movement, partition Gandhian philosophy or Gandhian teachings. Unlike his contemporaries like: Khushwant Singh, Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Raj Rao and Manohar Malgonkar, etc, all these writers written extensively about Indian freedom and other related things, whereas R.K. Narayan had written very less about freedom movement. He was completely detached from those things. In his famous novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, there is no glorification of Mahatma or rigor of freedom movement and only gentle irony, humor, and humorous characters become near to readers' heart.

R.K. Narayan's meticulous record of many aspects about human life has touched almost all aspects on this earth and it has not left anything. Further we understand his interest in many things in life from some of his personal anecdotes. R.K. Narayan married to Rajam from Coimbatore and he loved her passionately. Unfortunately, she died very early and he was left with his only daughter Hema. In fact, in his fictional autobiography *The English Teacher*, protagonist Krishna tries to connect with his wife's soul and fictional character Krishna is an alter ego to R.K. Narayan. It shows how R.K. Narayan's life was disturbed so early and it had hurt him so deeply

for many years. In spite of, all the odds he continued his writing and his brother and other extended family was a great help in taking care of his daughter and his strict dietary food habit.

Narayan is a quintessential Indian writer his sociological understanding was intense he wrote almost all his novels from his Yadavgiri house in Mysore. Now it has become museum from the effort of one of local English dailies 'Star of Mysore'. In one of its reports about pathetic condition of R.K. Narayan's house and it has been saved his house. R.K. Narayan was not a very gregarious person he never addressed any public meetings or that matter any intellectual gathering but he had many good friends and well-wishers: M.S. Subbulakshmi (legendary Carnatic Musician), Dr. M.N. Srinivas (well-known Sociologist) and his wife Rukmini Srinivas, T.S. Satyan (a famous photo journalist), C.D. Narasimhaiah (a legendary English Professor and Nehruvian scholar, University of Mysore), N. Ram (The Editor, The Hindu) and our own Mysore city journalist K.B. Ganapathi, Chief Editor of *Star of Mysore* and others were very close to him.

Some of their anecdotal experiences have been used in this research paper especially about food. As R.K. Narayan's grandnephew R.S. Krishnaswamy recalls now and then how his uncle was very particular about his diet especially his aptness for South Indian food and coffee. He recalls once in New Delhi Prime Minister Indira Gandhi invited R.K. Narayan for breakfast where the South Indian breakfast was served, and R.K. Narayan loved it. When Mrs. Indira Gandhi asked him about the breakfast, he was so bold enough to say, "the South Indian breakfast was excellent, but your cook does not know how to make coffee." These anecdotes get lead for this research paper.

His close friend T.S. Satyan, a very famous photojournalist, recollects in his famous memoir *Alive and Clicking (The Malgudi man)*: whenever R.K. Narayan used to drop in their home it was tough task for ladies to make perfect aromatic froth coffee for him and also Narayan was fond of curd rice and its slurping sound. Dr. M.N. Srinivas's wife Rukmini Srinivasa has written R.K. Narayan's visit to America and his fondness for areca nut in her famous book *Tiffin*. The transition from these personal anecdotes to R.K. Narayan's novels and gastronomical studies will bring more lead about gastronomy in the fictional world. Any piece of writing or literature will be autobiographical in nature, food or gastronomy will be one of the potential topics to know any society in depth. The gastronomical study is not only about cookery it goes beyond that it is in depth study of that society psychologically and sociologically. Food, cookery, behavior or habits have appeared in one or the other novels among his fourteen novels, short stories and autobiography.

To study about gastronomical aspects in R.K. Narayan's fictional world his famous novel *The Vendor of Sweets*, and short story *Half a Rupee Worth* and his autobiography *My Days* have been used extensively in this research paper. The food and its habits can be philosophical and

metaphysical in nature. *The Vendor of Sweets* was published in 1967, the protagonist of the novel Jagan is a 55 year old sweet vendor a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi, but R.K. Narayan has portrayed his character as a very simple one he is a so called Mahatma Gandhi follower always he has double standard in his life. The novel begins with Jagan's advice to his cousin "Conquest taste, and you will have conquered the self," (P7). Jagan says these Gandhian philosophical words though he is a sweet vendor who sells sweets to his customer by hook or crook. In an ironic way the person who is listening to him asks why to conquer taste and Jagan's answer is very blank and says "...I don't know, but all our sages advise us so" (P8). R.K Narayan makes sure that all his characters are ordinary mortals and they are very near to reality. Whatever Jagan preaches outside he himself is not following in his business. Jagan is a widower, in his personal life he wants to lead a very simple life and he pampered his son Mali who is out of control. Day by day Jagan's business started progressing he completely engross with his sweet shop and monitoring day today activities and he is so successful in his business but in his personal life he is a person of failure. Mali wants to go to America to do some writing course. In the beginning Jagan's world of confections is everything but later his worry started when his son returns from America with the half Korean and half American girl Grace. In the subsequent days their relationship gulfs further and Jagan lives with his so called Gandhian philosophy and shop. Everything is not fair with Jagan's simple living even he too has some of the common weakness and hypocrisy whenever something is left over in the evening, he orders his cook to make another type of sweet or he repeats the same sweet for the next day in a very philosophical way he justifies it as "...after all everything consists of flour, sugar and flavors" (P13). As R.K. Narayan was known as a legendary walker among his friends circle he used to walk around Mysore and used to interact with shopkeepers. Probably that made him to understand the anatomy of the food habit of one place and person. In this research paper food and its preparation are main focal points. For R.K. Narayan creation of *The Vendor of Sweets* is not just a story creation beyond that sweet vendor's job and writer's jobs are also the same. Both of them imagine create and flavor it but one adds material sugar, another one adds aesthetic sugar to the readers' mind. In fact, making sweet is also making literature and the title of the novel is very appropriate.

Along with the novels R.K. Narayan has written short stories extensively. One of his short stories has taken here for the research *Half a Rupee Worth* and this is about rice merchant Subbahi and his tragic end. In the story, only the protagonist's name appears; other characters are only generic in usage. Subbahi's business grows day by day through his hard work and also through his selfish black market business. During the drought time one day a man tuns up for rice only with the half a rupee in his hand. At the outset Subbahi rejects him but later agrees to give him and goes inside the secret godown there he meets a tragic end; a rice bag falls on him and dies then and there with half a rupee in hand. In the story R.K. Narayan has infused a gastronomical deep

philosophical answer that is how much a human being can have only that much one can have not more than that.

Conclusion

Though food is a generic term, it gives a lot of insights towards society and people and individual personality. In R.K. Narayan's novels, Malgudi, Albert Mission School, Lawley extension, Lawley statute, food/cooker/gastronomy also takes an equal position either directly or indirectly. To illustrate it further Ananda Bhavan *hotle* appears in all his fiction. From the study of autobiographical and fictional world one can come to the inference that R.K. Narayan was not a foodie but very particular about some of the things and in a lighter vein probably. That is one of the reasons for his long health. He passed away in 2001 in Chennai at the age of 94.

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