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Language and Its Influence on Society

Language is one of the most fundamental aspects of human behaviour and it is a social phenomenon. More often than not, human beings use language to communicate with one another. The relationship between language on the one hand, and society and culture or behaviour on the other, has been viewed from several angles: 1. It is society that determines language. 2. Society and language are two different, independent and separate entities. 3. One is the cause and the other is the effect.

Whichever positions one takes, language certainly is an important means for the transmission of social structure from one generation to the next generation.

Even as language may differ from one ethnic group to another, its manifestation within an ethnic group may also differ from group to group, profession to profession and person to person. This flexibility and variation offer many ways to seek, reveal and establish, and retain and preserve identities of individuals, groups and pursuits, etc.

Standard language both written and spoken, regional and social dialects, as well as speech variety used in a variety of professions, usually referred to as register, and special markers or ways of use of speech that characterize an individual's speech from another (broadly called as idiolects), gender distinctions in use of language, etc. are some of the manifest representations that are available to creative writers in delineating their characters.

An Indian creative writer writing in English depicting Indian ethnic, social, and even metropolitan/urban Indian groups and characters is confronted with several issues relating to the exploitation of language markers in delineating his or her characters, events, etc.

Socio-Cultural Descriptions Found in Indian Writing in English through Language

Indian writing in English reflects its Indianness largely through the exploitation of the socio-cultural factors which form the background and function as the prime mover of the story. Names of individuals and places where events take place also add to the Indianness of the language used. Indian myths, folktales, folk metaphor, proverbs, Indian flora and fauna also form an important part of the Indianness. Indian traditions, Indian customs,

Indian costumes, Indian beliefs, Indian food habits, music, Indian religion, etc., have their own specific characteristics and find their way in Indian Writing English.

Caste identification through professions, dress code, language use, place of settlement within a town or village, and "peculiar" sectarian practices are also exploited in creating an aroma of Indianness. Unconsciously, such descriptions may also reveal the underlying discriminations and prejudices.

Women in the Indian society get different roles and are viewed in different angles on the basis of the role they have in their families or society at large. They are more stringently subjected to a moral code in the traditional and not so traditional descriptions. And this also brings in Indianness. The status of women and the nature of women are duly reflected in the writings of Indian authors writing in English.

Stratification of the people on the basis of occupation and the names of the various professions and address terms also reflect the socio-cultural situation.

So, through the medium of language, whether deliberate or non-deliberate, aspects of Indianness are revealed in creative Indian writing in English.

Language Use in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*

Generally speaking, R. K. Narayan uses direct and plain language in his novels, especially more so in *The man-eater of Malgudi* (Narayan 1961). Narayan's use of simple vocabulary and plain and less involved language may be due to several reasons: he was writing about events taking place in an Indian community of characters located in India; he was also writing largely for an audience who already are familiar with the environment. Both these necessitated a kind of plain and direct language. His metaphors and other references were also directly from Indian contexts with Indian connotations, not needing to use words within which Western/European cultural meanings would dominate. In any case, as Alan Warner points out, "a good writer is not measured by the extent of his vocabulary, but by his skill in finding the 'mot juste' the word that will hit the nail cleanly on the head." (*A Short Guide to English Style*, 38)

Narayan himself in an interview remarked about the 'plainness' of his language:

> It has been my aim to develop a medium – a transparent medium which gives to the reader an illusion that he is reading the book in his own language, not in an alien one. It is not opaque, it is not coloured … (10)

What is striking in Narayan's creativity is the peculiar use to which he puts language in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. His vocabulary, though accused of being 'lean' is refreshing and interesting. It is his style of words used, which has to be noted.

A business man is reduced to his initials 'K.J.'; he is Malgudi's aerated water specialist; the lawyer achieves distinction because he is an 'adjournment' expert; the seventy year-old man needs no identification except to be called a 'septuagenarian'; Nataraj comes to be viewed as an 'abductor of elephants' by the tailor and party, who in turn pities Muthu for having to treat all his 'elephant associates' to tea; he also experiences an 'unholy thrill' (as though thrill can be classified as being holy and unholy) as he talks to Rangi at one stage. Equally interesting is the way in which Narayan describes certain articles: The 'Queen Anne Chair' and four more chairs of 'varying heights and shapes' which adorn Nataraj's parlour are resurrected from the family lumber room. The leg harmonium, numerous old bottles, several philosophical volumes have a special status as remnants of the joint family.

Narayan has fashioned for himself a kind of diction of common life for his Indian scene - a medium which is at once casual and convincing and used with complete confidence. It can always subtly convey the flavor of Indian speech in an Indian setting without any of the awkwardness of translation. Narayan's use of English is superbly simple and straightforward. The secret of his success lies in the perfect matching of content and form, matter and manner in the most original use of language.

Social Values Portrayed in *The Man- eater of Malgudi*

The vision of life that Narayan is trying to promote is based on social benefit and human content rather than a mere technological advancement. He is well acquainted with the powerful hold of traditional values, rituals and attitudes on the psyche of the middle class (usually so-called high and middle castes). He presents skillful descriptions of their values in his novels, often with some humour. He is more a descriptivist than an analyst. Narayan has a great regard for family ties and pieties of the home and the family. Human relationships, particularly domestic relationships, occupy a central place in his novels.

In the novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi* one can find many references made to the traditional customs followed in India. Some of the traditional customs referred to in the book are given below:

Narayan brings out the religious temper and the belief in gods, in the life of his characters. Nataraj says at the beginning of the novel:

"I hung up a framed picture of Goddess Laxmi poised on her lotus ……." (7)

One of the customary practices usually followed by members of the so-called upper and middle castes among the Hindus at the beginning of the day is to worship the Sun god. Nataraj also does the same, after having a dip in the river.

"When the east glowed I sat for a moment on the sand reciting a prayer to the sun to illumine my mind". (10)

Another practice that is followed in Indian society is consulting an almanac for some auspicious date for any important event, such as betrothal, wedding, etc. In *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, when the poet had completed his poem on Krishna and Radha, with the gods marriage-episode, Nataraj and Sastri think that it would be auspicious to celebrate the occasion and so they seek the help of an astrologer to fix up a date for the celebration. This shows their beliefs in gods and astrology. "The astrologer had a page of an almanac open before him and he says to Sastri, Nataraj and the poet: "I have a date for you…… No, actually I have three dates: good, not so good, and half-good" (110).

At the end of the novel, Sastri goes on a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram and to a dozen other pilgrimage places. When he comes back, he takes out a tiny packet containing a pinch of sacred ash and vermillion from his pocket and hands these to Nataraj. And Nataraj says: "I daubed the holy dust on my forehead" (181).

There are also references in the novel of the joint family system and the division of ancestral property which is followed as a customary practice in Indian homes.

Nataraj says: "I was content to live in our house as it had been left by my father. I was a youth studying in the Albert Mission, when the legal division of ancestral property occurred between my father and his brothers. I well remember the day when his four brothers marched out with their wives and children, trundling away their share of heirlooms, knick-knacks and household articles. Everything that could be divided into five was cut up into equal parts and given one to each. Such things as could not be split up were given to those who clamored the loudest. A rattan easy-chair on which my grandfather used to lie in the courtyard was claimed by my second uncle whose wife had started all the fur ore over the property. She also claimed a pair of rosewood benches……. My father's third brother as a compensation for letting these items go, claimed a wooden almirah as his own and a leg harmonium operated by a pedal. … All the four brothers of my father with their wives and children, numbering fifteen, had lived under the same roof for many years (11).

As for women, Narayan upholds the traditional value of the Indian women's fidelity to the hearth and her husband. The wife does not call her husband by name and mostly the husband also does not call the wife by name in the novels of Narayan.

In the novel *The Man-eater of Malgudi* the wife of Nataraj is a typical Indian wife, loving, affectionate, dutiful and serviceable. Narayan has not given her a name. She is referred to merely as the wife of Nataraj. When Nataraj is ill and delirious, she takes him home from the temple and pampers him. As Nataraj himself tells us: "She unrolled a mat, spread a soft pillow and insisted upon my lying down to rest, turning a deaf ear to all my

pleading that I was in a perfectly normal condition. She went in to make coffee and nourishment for me" (141).

Traditionally inter-caste marriage has been looked down upon in the Indian society. Several ancient and traditional Hindu texts, prescribing codes of living, despise such marriages and the resultant offspring. "Arranged marriage" (spouses for the persons to be married are picked by the elders in the family) is preferred and considered valid over "marriage of choice" or often called "love marriage" in Indian English idiom (Boys and girls choose their spouses on their own). Narayan the descriptivist, through the life of the mahout, a minor character in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, brings this out clearly: "He recounted the tales of all the elephants that he had coaxed and taken to the various zoos in the country and he spoke of a chance that he once had of taking an elephant to Tokyo or NewYork which was frustrated by his brothers who did not like the girl he had married and wanted to punish him for not marrying according to their own arrangements. From Kerela, far-off Kerela, this mahout had brought a girl to marry, but his brothers advised him to pay off the woman and raised among themselves two hundred rupees" (98).

Narayan deals with all such issues relating to traditional beliefs and practices, caste, caste hierarchy, caste discrimination and caste conflict, etc. descriptively, with no tone of evaluation or judgment.

When any police investigation was conducted in a family or when some family member was taken to the police station, it was traditionally considered as a black-mark on the family status. In the novel, when police investigation is done in Nataraj's press over the sudden and unexpected death of Vasu, Nataraj's wife says: "After all these years of honest and reputable living, we don't want the police marching in and out. Even in the worst days when the property was partitioned no one dreamt of asking the police to come. We don't want to do that now" (177). And Nataraj tells the readers about his wife: "She preferred to walk across the street when the neighbours were not looking and slip into my press by the back door and face the police" (177)

Class or status-ranking and caste consciousness are widely prevalent in the lives of people in India. In the novel *Swami and Friends* this status-ranking consciousness comes to the forefront through Rajam's behaviour towards the cook who works in his house.

Being the son of the Police Superintendent, Rajam thinks superior of himself. The status-ranking consciousness in him makes him to speak to the cook with great authority. (A cook in a Police Superintendent's official home is usually an orderly, a constable detailed for kitchen duties in the officer's home.) Rajam feels that he must display his authority by giving the cook strict orders. He does not even allow the cook to enquire with him about the details of his orders. What he orders to be done must be done the very same minute without any questioning. In the presence of his friends, Swami and Mani, he even goes to

the extent of abusing the cook, for no reason, just to make a show of his position to his friends. He says: "You dirty ass, take it away, don't put it there" (26).

Indian officialdom, both civil and military, is still, unfortunately, marked by such features.

Then again "Rajam burst out: You rascal, you scoundrel …" (26) At last he serves his friends himself and then gives a statement in support of his action: "I had to bring this myself. I went in and gave the cook such a kick for his impertinence that he is lying unconscious in the kitchen." (27)

The father figure in Indian homes is considered to be the head of the family and is treated with fear and respect. All reverence is given to the father figure, next only to the gods. Father is not easily approachable, at least until the recent past, in traditional households. Some distance between the father and children within a family was (and is) maintained. Rights are not equally shared between men and women in the family.

Swaminathan in *Swami and Friends* finds it very difficult to have things done by his father. He has a list of stationery items to purchase so as to appear for his forthcoming examinations and the list includes unruled white paper-20sheets, ruled white paper-10 sheets, black ink bottle – 1, clips and pins. But he hesitates to approach his father. He goes near his father's room and thinks if he can ask or not. Just as he thinks his father senses someone's presence and calls out, "Who is that?" There was no friendliness in his tone (57) Swaminathan stands silent. And then the father realizes that it is his son. Swami, having come to his father's room for some need is not able to speak. He is spell-bound. Seeing the paper in Swami's hand his father asks him as to what it is. To which Swami replies "Nothing father," thrusting the paper into his pocket. "What is that?" "Swaminathan had to cough twice to find his voice." (58)

As discussed earlier, belief in gods is another aspect that is found in Hindu culture. And when houses are built for upper castes people, the foundation for a *pooja room* is also laid. Belief in the gods is seen in Swaminathan's life as well. "He secured a small cardboard box, placed in it a couple of pebbles, and covered them with fine sand and leaves. He carried the box to the *pooja room* and placed it in a corner" (69). Swaminathan is in need of money urgently, and so he asks the gods to convert his pebbles into two three-paisa coins. But when he opens his box, he finds the pebbles as they were without any physical change and he is disappointed. "He wanted to abuse the gods, but was afraid to. Instead, he vented all his rage on the cardboard box" (70). Even then he was afraid that his doing so, would offend the gods: "But it was dangerous to incur the wrath of gods, they might make him fail in his examinations, or kill Father, Mother, Granny or the baby. He picked up the box again, and put back into it the sand, the leaves, and the pebbles that were crushed, crumpled and kicked a minute ago. He dug a small pit at the root of a banana tree and buried the box reverently" (70).

Personal Traits of Characters Highlighted through Language Use

Language highlights the personal traits of the speaker. Appropriate language use is commonly, but unfortunately, taken to be a cue to reveal the character of individuals. Through the words spoken by a character we try to assess the basic qualities of a character.

1. Vasu, the man-eater of Malgudi

The man-eater of Malgudi is not a ferocious wild animal, but he is Vasu, the ruthless taxidermist. He is a giant of a man, a bully who has had his training under a famous 'pahelwan'. Vasu has no conscience, no moral scruples and has no regard either for gratitude or obligation. He kills his guru who had fed him every day with twelve eggs, hundreds of almonds and half a seer of milk. He says:

> I knew his weak spot. I hit him there with the edge of my palm with a chopping movement……. And he fell down and squirmed on the floor. I knew he could perform no more. I left him there and walked out and gave upon the strong man's life once and for all (19).

Vasu became a taxidermist by chance and accident, but nevertheless he adores his profession of taxidermy. For he says; "Science conquers nature in a new way each day; why not in creation also? That's my philosophy, sir. I challenge any man to contradict me."

The entire business of killing is viewed coldly by Vasu. He feels sick when he finds a man talking sentimentally like an old widow. Shooting, to him, is something cold and objective. He tells Nataraj:

> There is nothing terrible in shooting. You pull your trigger and out goes the bullet and at the other end, there is an object waiting to receive it. It is just give and take. At one time I was squeamish like you. It was Hussein who broadened my outlook. He used to tell me the way to be broad-minded is to begin to like a thing you don't like. It makes for a very scientific outlook (134).

Vasu is an aggressive bully. Morality has no place in his philosophy of life. He speaks to Nataraj's friends aggressively and satirically. He talks about Sen, the journalist friend of Nataraj: "If he is so much wiser than Nehru, why doesn't he try to become the Prime Minister of India." (111)

Vasu tells Nataraj:

> Your whole crowd sickens me! You are a fellow without any sense. Why are you so enthusiastic about a poet obsessed with monosyllables, I don't know. And then that local Nehru, Who does he think he is? All of you are joining to waste everyone's time and money (131).

In a modest traditional town like Malgudi, Vasu's notions of marriage, society and democracy, like his attitude to everything else, prove to be shocking. There is a marriage if a man and a woman are willing and the printer has nothing to do with it according to Vasu.

According to him: "If a man is willing and the woman is willing there is a marriage. What has a printer to do with it?" (33).

Later he says about the people who marry: "Only fools marry and they deserve all the trouble they get" (33).

And further, he says: "Drink is like marriage. If people like it it's their business and nobody else's" (34).

Vasu does not like any kind of social harmony. He is not bothered about the temple procession, but is adamant in killing the temple elephant. He moralizes: "If God is everywhere, why follow Him only in a procession?" (149).

2. Nataraj and Interior Monolgue

The "brutality" of Vasu's trade strikes Nataraj rather late. He loathes it, but is frightened to ask Vasu to vacate his building, and feels dwarfed and tongue-tied before Vasu. He says: "The trouble with me was that I was not able to say 'no' to anyone and that got me into complications with everyone, from a temple prostitute to a taxidermist." (157)

When Vasu does not talk with Nataraj for a long time, it affects Nataraj and he reveals his mind to us through these words:

> I could never be a successful enemy to anyone. Any enmity worried me night and day. … It bothered me like a toothache. … I was longing for a word with Vasu. I stood like a child at the treadle, hoping he would look at me, and nod and that all would be well again. He was a terrible specimen of human being, no doubt, but I wanted to be on talking terms with him… (74)

Narayan has made use of the interior monologue of Nataraj at crucial points in the story to give the readers a peep into his soul. One example is given below:

> I lacked the courage to read it. If he came back suddenly and caught me reading he might perhaps break my spine or hold me upside down and rattle my teeth out of my skull. I also wanted to know urgently how much money he had in his purse and what were the unpaid bills standing in his name, but I lacked the courage to undertake the research now (114).

We find passages of interior monologues abounding in *The Man-eater of Malgudi.*

3. Language and Content of Some Minor Characters

Behind Vasu and Nataraj stand a number of minor characters who fill up the canvas of the novel and impart to it variety, reality and universality. Sastri is the close friend and lieutenant of Nataraj. He is the man behind the blue curtain of Nataraj, who does all the printing work for him. During an emergency, the relationship of the employer and employee is reversed. Sastri would dictate orders for Nataraj to follow. Sastri tells Nataraj: "The blocks are rather worn. You'll have to let in more ink" (109).

Sastri is a family man and also very religious, for he tells Nataraj; "I'd not trouble you but for the fact that this Satyanarayan Puja must be performed today in my house: my children and wife will be waiting for me at the door" (14).

He narrates to Nataraj tales of rakshasas and says, "To deal with a rakshasa one must possess the marksmanship of a hunter, the wit of a pundit and the guile of a harlot." (75)

Muthu is a simple man of ordinary means, if not actually poor. He keeps a tea stall in Memphi village at the foot of the Memphi forest. He has a family. He says "I have four children, and a daughter to marry" (39).

He offers tea and buns to Nataraj free of cost, as Nataraj has no money with him, at that time. He tells Nataraj giving him buns and glass of tea: "This is my treat. You don't have to pay for these buns" (39).

Later he speaks to the bus driver and arranges that the bus would carry Nataraj to Malgudi. He tells the conductor "Brother, give him a seat to the town; he will pay at the other end" (41). Thus he extricates Nataraj form a great difficulty and earns his gratitude.

Sastri reasons out many a thing with Nataraj including the importance and relevance of *puranic* stories for the current affairs, even as he is focused on rituals for his family. Sastry's language use is thus from a level different from that of Muthu, obviously from a social class/caste lower than that of Sastry (names are deliberately chosen and these are potent with such information). Muthu's language is very basic, meeting the urgent needs one faces. He is also concerned about his own family for a different reason: a large

family to feed, with a daughter to marry. He was not reasoning out with implications from *puranic* stories, but tended to attend to the urgent need of a stranger, Nataraj. What is most striking here is Muthu's use of the address term *Brother* to address the conductor. Through this usage, oneness of economic class and social level is achieved and a familial kinship is established. It is rather difficult to imagine Sastry using this term to address the driver during the period in which the story happens.

Conclusion

As the titles of Narayan's novels suggest, character and human element are at the heart of Narayan's fiction. The individual is all-important in his novels because his novels are developed on character. Narayan is a writer who not only considers the individual but the society as a whole. The well-being of the society, according to Narayan, is manifested upon the individual, his character, his occupation and his friends and associates. And thus, he links the individual and the society in all his novels. Narayan's recording of people's reactions as well as the responses that they motivate are both realistic and amusing.

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