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A Brief Survey of Indian Nationalism in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D. and Hemant Kumar Shukla, Ph.D.



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R._K._Narayan

Abstract

In the present investigation, Narayan's views on nation and nationalism are being assessed and a critical appreciation is offered. His novels subtly portrayed the issues raised and faced by the people in India during the Freedom Struggle. Mass movements of the Freedom Struggle along with an empathic writing in favor of Gandhian thoughts are presented. Through his novels, Narayan tried to raise the then major national issues, which

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are still relevant. He wrote in favour of the Three Language Formula as a national language. The novelist wrote in agreement with Gandhian thoughts in his novels. One can enjoy the fragrance of Indian ethics, values, and culture throughout his novels. The present investigation is an attempt to bring to the surface those ideas which remained deeply-rooted in him throughout his life. Certain constraints Narayan faced in his publishing career are also pointed out at the end.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, Nationalism, Hindi, Gandhian thoughts, *per capita* income, *annas*, sarees

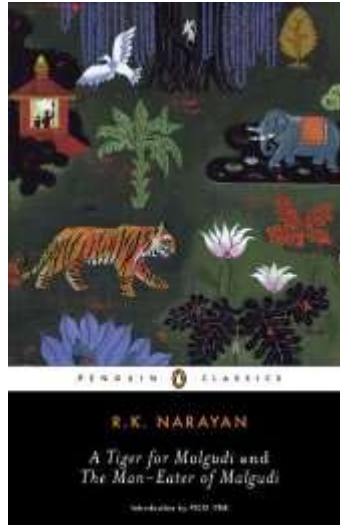
Introduction

R. K. Narayan occupies a pre-eminent place in Indian fiction in English. He is internationally acclaimed as the greatest Indian fiction writer in English and his novels are still popular. Narayan obviously tried to raise a major national issue when he advocated for Hindi as ‘our national language, given to us by Mahatma Gandhi himself (1). Narayan used many commonly used Hindi and Indian words in his novels. This made Hindi and Indian words known to those who did not know Hindi and other Indian languages, but were reading Narayan’s works regularly. His fondness for India and Indian values led him to deliberately and freely use the words of Indian origin, most of them being Hindi words.

Susan Nirmala S. in her research paper “Indianness in R. K. Narayan’s novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* published in *Language in India* (Volume 9 : 5 May 2009) made a very interesting survey of R. K. Narayan’s wide-ranging use of words of Indian origin. Some of the words like Pulav, Melas, Pandal, Lungi, etc. were used more than 100 times by him, and that also in a single novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1969). She writes:

R.K. Narayan’s “Indianism” includes words some of which have already become part of the vocabulary of the English language like *saree*, or *sari* and some other words which are on their way to become a part of the English language like *Deepavali*, *ahimsa*, etc.

Susan Nirmla lists the following words. Page numbers refer to page numbers in the cited novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1969).



- Deepavali (7)
- Sari (7)
- Paisa (7)
- Taluk (9)
- Pyol (12)
- Dhoti (10)
- Ramayana (12)
- Puja (13)
- Satyanarayana puja (14)
- Phaelwan (18)
- Seer (18)
- Appa (19)
- Jutka (24)
- Bhagavat gita (30)
- Upanishads (30)
- Beedi (44)
- Khadi (47)
- Garuda (53)
- Kavi (55)
- Idli (70)

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Rakshasa (75)
Puranas (76)
Asura (87)
Namaskaram (87)
Jibba (88)
Ahimsa (92)
Radhakalyan (103)
Dharma (121)
Pulav (123)
Pandal (126)
Melas (149)
Kumba mela (149)
Mami (153)
Lungi (168)

With the increasing popularity of Indian literature in English, *saree* (the dress of the female), and *dhoti* (the garment of the male) are progressively used and accepted as such (2).

A National Issue

In *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), it is for the first time that Narayan touches upon a national theme and upholds the national policy on language - the three language formula consisting of the regional language, the national language and English:

When the monsoon set in, in October-November, the circus moved out of Malgudi to other centers in along caravan parading the animals, which made the circus known all along the way; the central office at Malgudi worked all through the year.

At every show, captain made a speech, sometimes autobiographical and sometimes to boost a speech act such as mine'. He delivered his message in at least three languages as he explained: "..... in Hindi since it is our national language and given to us by Mahatma Gandhi himself; also in English because as our beloved respected leader Nehru put it, it opens a

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window on the world. In Tamil, because, it is our mother tongue in which our greatest poets like Kamban, Valluvar composed, also the sublime inspiring patriotic songs of Bharathi, who can ever forget things” (3).

Ideas on Nation and Nationalism

The glimpses of the idea of nation and nationalism are depicted in Narayan’s novel based on Gandhian thoughts. The values he held high in his characters are Gandhian (Narayan, 1955; Aginhotri, 1982, pp. 13&15).

Narayan highlighted not only the traditional ideal of renunciation but also his values included moral uprightness, truthfulness and other issues that cover man’s life in all areas, chiefly social, educational, political and economic (Narayan, 1952, p.14).

The following may be cited for Narayan’s insistence on moral values, truthfulness and other issues that cover man’s life:

Views on Education

In the 8th chapter of *The English Teacher* (1945), there is a dialogue which is undoubtedly the epitome of his views on education:

This education has reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage . . . What about our own roots? . . . I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administration offices (4).

Portrayal of Students

It is significant that his novels portray many school children or college going boys or those who have just left college to enter professional life. Invariably, the profession happens to be journalism. Chandran is the first character of Narayan who had given up all other professions in favour of a newspaper agency in Malgudi. Srinivas of the novel *Mr. Sampath* was himself an editor of the *Banner*, a protest magazine (Narayan, 1948). Narayan’s concern with the quality of life and education in India is reflected in his novel *The English Teacher*. His later novels also have many student characters. Sriram of *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and Mali of *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) are among many other examples found in his novels.

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Conflict between the British Rulers and Indian Subjects – Portrait of Nationalism

Very early in the novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan introduced the conflict between the British rulers and the ruled in colonial India. In his characteristic mode of comedy, he viewed this conflict in terms of cultural collision between Christianity and traditional Hinduism. Narayan concentrated on the abnormality of characters of both British and Indians that resulted from this collision.

Another event which declared the issue of nation and nationalism in Narayan's novels is when in a chapter titled Broken Panes in *Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan announced very solemnly:

On the 15th of August 1930, about two thousand citizens of Malgudi assembled on the right bank of Sarayu to protest against the arrest of Gauri Sankar, a political worker of Bombay ... Swami with his band of friends had stumbled into this meeting. English versus Indians - a question of identity is the subject of the speech Swami heard. "We are slaves of slaves, ... just think for a while, we are three hundred and thirty six millions, and our land is as big as Europe minus Russia. England is no bigger than our Madras Presidency, and is inhabited by a handful of white rogues and is thousands of miles away. Yet we bow in homage before the Englishman!" Stirred by the speaker's eloquence, Swaminathan shouted, '*Gandhi ki Jai*' (5).

Gandhian Thoughts

Here R.K. Narayan tries to tell us the impact of Gandhian thoughts on the minds of Swami and Mani, his friend:

With the lecturer they wept over the plight of the Indian peasant; resolved to boycott English goods, especially Lancashire and Manchester cloth, ... and Swaminathan was going to meet it out by wearing only *khaddar*, the rough home spun (6).

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This is how Narayan tried to tell how Swami, the hero of the novel, got initiated into the Gandhian way of national protest. The evening's programme, as narrated in the novel, closed with the bonfire of pieces of foreign cloth. Gandhi's ideas appealed to Swami in a personal way because of his demoralizing experience in the scripture class. Here is one more example:

Next Morning Swami involved in boycotting the class because as he was informed, 'one of the greatest sons of the Motherland has been sent to jail. Despite of the Headmaster's warnings, thundering shouts of *Bharat Mata ki Jai*, *Gandhi ki Jai* and *Gauri Shankar ki Jai* resounded through Malgudi streets (7).

Narayan expanded this political scenario further true to the spirit of Gandhi. Narayan's simple language created a picture that could be corroborated by historic facts of how people's apathy turned into their involvement with the national cause.

Portraying the Real Picture of India

In *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Narayan tried to portray the real picture of the then India through the person talking to Jagan:

But this is a poor country, sir. Per capita income is three annas. He still stuck to the figure that he got out of a book called "Poverty and un-British rule in India" in his college days, but this figure restrained him from demanding of every parent in town that he spent eight annas a day at his shop. Poor country! Most people cannot afford even rice for two meals a day (8).

This sentence portrayed the high rate of inflation during post-Independence years.

Patriotic Feelings

In another event, Narayan makes his hero Jagan felt proud of going to prison during struggle for Independence.

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I had to leave the college, when Gandhi ordered us to non-cooperate. I spent the best of my student years in prison”, said Jagan, feeling heroic (9).

Patriotic feelings are often conveyed through Jagan. He often goes back to past in his memories, when he was an activist in the freedom struggle keeping Gandhi as a role model.

When he remembered the word ‘service’ any activity became touched with significance...The first time he heard the word was in 1937 when Mahatma Gandhi visited Malgudi and had addressed a vast gathering on the sands of the river. He spoke of service, explaining how every human action acquired a meaning when it was performed as a service (10).

Jagan was so patriotic that he didn’t like the idea of going abroad and study and anything said in favour of America upset him. This is reflected in the sentence below:

Jagan was furious at this notion; it was outrageous and hurt his nation pride ... Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his Ramayana? (11).

Waiting for the Mahatma - Gandhian bildungsroman

Waiting for the Mahatma (Narayan, 1955, p.13) is a sort of Gandhian bildungsroman that charts its protagonist’s growth from selfish privilege to local, committed activism. Sriram was initially a lazy young man who seeks only a secure middle-class lifestyle. Falling in love with the devout Gandhian Bharati, he serves in the Quit India movement, although he still has no consistent political ideals (at one point he becomes an anti-British terrorist).

Gandhian phase of the anti-colonial movement for India's freedom finds frequent expression in literary representations of the period. There was large-scale support among Indians for Gandhi's intervention in the civil disobedience and Quit India movements (12).

However, *Waiting for the Mahatma* reflects certain ambivalence towards the freedom movement. There were many who were impressed by the more benign aspects of the British presence in India and Narayan's own writing came to depend heavily on patronage by British

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publishers and readers. He was apparently writing for an English audience and could not upset the colonial English system, which supported him. But despite all these factors, he succeeded in upholding the Indian values which were inherent and, as has been mentioned earlier, deeply-rooted in him.

Conclusion

It is evident from the present study that the Gandhian thoughts and nationalism occupied an important place in the novels of R. K. Narayan. They also played a role in creating political awareness to some extent. The novels of Narayan brought the concerns of national feeling among the English-reading individuals and groups including those up in administrative hierarchy serving the British Empire. The novels were written on the Indian issues in English language, which was the language of the educated and high ranking officials in India.

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