

## Issues of Caste and Communalism in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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### Abstract

Narayan's novels reflect a true picture of India during the British rule, through the mirror of his locale, an imaginary home town Malgudi, which is a microcosm of India. The locale of Narayan's novels is Malgudi, a town somewhere in South India. Traditional concept of typical Hindu thought of status, caste, creed and communalism are evident in his novels. The main characters are linked to these thoughts; this is discussed here as issues related to caste and communalism. The problems of caste, and creed are portrayed in his novels, but these matters are left unsolved by the author. There is no lasting cure suggested for their eradication, neither are there any suggestions given for peaceful co-existence. He also discusses issues of communalism in his novels and advocates the Gandhian ideology of being an Indian first rather than the follower of any one religion.

**Key Words:** R.K Narayan, Malgudi, Caste, Religion, Communalism

### Introduction

Narayan dealt with the issues of caste in his novels in context with man-woman relationship and Indian marriages. He upheld the Hindu traditions and did not support mixed marriages, that is, inter-caste and inter-religion marriages. In his novels, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs*, he raised the issues of caste in Indian culture and tried to show the disparity of cult and faith, or how differences between religions still constitute an impediment to a legitimate and valid marriage among the Hindus in India. A Hindu can neither marry a woman of low origin like *devdasi*, like Rosie, nor a Christian girl, Daisy (Narayan, 1958). Disparity of caste and creed are the insurmountable obstacle in a Hindu marriage in India in Narayan's novels.

## Themes

R.K Narayan deals with themes centering upon a moment or a mood of crises and for these he found plenty of material in the life around him. Narayan dealt with at least five different places with issues of casteism and religion in his novels. In keeping with the highest Hindu tradition, Narayan chose not to approve of mixed marriages, in his novels. The disparity between culture and faith or religion does still constitute an impediment to legitimate and valid marriage among the Hindus of India. A Hindu in his novel can neither marry a woman of low origin like a *devdasi* [Rosie] in *the Guide*, nor a Christian girl [Daisy]. This latter is often shown as an insurmountable obstacle in a Hindu marriage as seen in his novel *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (Narayan, 1962).

## Role of Religion

Narayan had a definite sustained mythical structure that followed the well known pattern of the story from the *puranas* where a demon grows too powerful and threatens the heavens with his elemental forces of disorder, but finally blows up like a bubble in the sea, leaving the universe as calm as before. Critics have pointed out how closely the novel recreates the old Hindu myth of *Bhasmasura*. At times Narayan uses phrase and dialogue from the characters which inscribe the role of religion in his novels like when Savitiri defines Vasu in the novel: ‘Every rakshasa gets swollen with his ego, he thinks he is Invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him (*The Man Eater of Malgudi*, Narayan 1962, p.95).

There are events which show that religion, belief and faith play an important role in the life of Indian Hindus. It is depicted in the event when Narayan mentions in one of his novels “*Waiting for Mahatma*”, that “there are a dozen temples within the radius of fifty miles.” The Hindu view of *karma* and *mukti* can also be seen in the novel “*Waiting for Mahatma*” when Kanni, the shopkeeper compels Sriram to settle an old debt of his grandmother of nine rupees and twelve annas so that the dead woman’s soul would rest in peace in the next world (Narayan, 1955). *The Painter of Signs* is another novel exhibiting the mythological view of Indian Hindus which is evident in many of the novels of R.K Narayan (Narayan, 1976). The mythological

characters of holy Ganga and king Shantanu offer a parallel to the relationship between Daisy and Raman. The theme of Narayan's novel, *The Tiger and Man* is the oneness of soul of all living beings which is so alike, its sublimation through gradual self discipline and renunciation, and the final salvation from the bondage of karma and the cycle of birth.

According to William Walsh (1979), "The religious sense of Indian myth is a part of Narayan's grip of reality of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience. What one can say about Narayan without qualification is that he embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism."

### **Characters within Tradition and Religious Belief**

Narayan's novels are essentially stories of Indian life whose basis is religion and tradition based on their caste and community. Most of Narayan's novels trace the growth of an individual who is firmly rooted in the Indian social order that is in turn based on their religion. The protagonists - Swaminathan, Chandran, Krishnan, Ramani, Raju, Sampath, Margaya, Jagan, Sriram and Raman are literally the members of a Hindu joint family. The individual of his novels like any other Indian has to grow in this environment and his character is shaped at times under the influence of his caste and religion, from the selection of his career and the selection of his life partner. The family itself observes the age-old customs, tradition and beliefs of the Hindu religion.

### **Narayan and Varnasharama**

Narayan in his novels present the Hindu view of Varnasharama, that is, the imperatives of Hindu society. *Varna* and *Ashrama* which regulate the lives of every Hindu, whether modern or traditional in India, does the same with the lives of all individuals in R.K Narayan's novels. Narayan's characters, like a fair majority of Indians, implicitly accept the manners, mores and professions of their castes. The issues of inter-caste marriages are raised in some of the novels of Narayan to portray the picture of the Indian audience who frown on inter-caste marriages and outcaste the person from their caste. They can find no place in the fixed pattern of the Hindu society where matching of caste, religion and horoscope is the most important feature of Hindu

marriage. This adherence to caste, religion and horoscope is quite evident in Narayan's novels. Krishnan loves the English teacher, but he marries Shushila, a girl of his caste, in spite of the mismatch of their horoscopes.

Another matter of morality is evident from Narayan's most read and popular novel, *The Guide*, where Raju's mother objects to his affair with Rosie partly because she is a married woman, but largely because she is a devdasi, a dancing girl, whose caste is not known. Again, in his novel *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan the hero is shocked when his son Mali imports an American girl Grace and intends to marry her (Narayan, 1967). He does not accept her as his daughter in law and does not have peace until he succeeds in booking the girl's passage back to America. The issue of caste can be evident from the lines of Jagan:

“Assured by this protestation, Jagan said, ‘What shall I do now?’

‘About what?’

‘About Mali and that girl.’

The cousin gave a clear-headed statement, ‘Get through their marriage very quickly in the hill temple. It can be arranged within a few hours.’

‘Alas! I don't know what her caste is, so how can I’.

In addition, Jagan also mentions that Gandhi fought against the caste system in India, when his daughter-in-law innocently asks what is the present status of caste-system in India?

The next event is from Narayan's novel from *The Painter of Signs* when Raman, the hero announces his decision to marry Daisy, a Christian girl. His aunt shows a lot of agitation towards this marriage and threatens to leave home for ever (Narayan, 1976). Raman in *The Painter of Signs* has to contend with this issue of caste due to the traditional force his aunt is embroiled in. The very first question she puts to him when he announces his decision to marry Daisy is, ‘That girl! What is her caste? Who is she?.... Isn't she a Christian or something...a name which

is...How can you bring in a Christian?’ Before she asks all these questions, she shows her consternation and drops the vessel, as if she has lost her hold on things.

Raman’s announcement to marry a girl of another community and religion touch something primordial, exposing the racial prejudices dormant in his aunt, who has slaved all her life to bring him up as her son. This decision of Raman ends in her aunt’s decision to ‘leave home for Kasi’. The above events and dialogues expose the issues of caste and creed that take precedence in the novels of Narayan time and again.

### **Religion and Portrayal of Women Characters**

The influence of religion on Hindu life is also evident from the portrayal of women characters in Narayan’s novel, Savitri of *The Dark Room* (Narayan, 1938) and Shushila of *The English Teacher* (Narayan, 2000). He created the characters to show the pathos and superficial pride of Hindu wives in accordance with the accepted Hindu concept of a married woman immersed in the daily rituals of their caste and religion. Other features like the decoration of the threshold of homes with a festoons of green mango leaves, and the floors and doorways with white rice flour drawings of many designs; then there are the traditional reception of welcoming the daughter-in-law with ‘arathi’ – bringing a huge plate or tray full of oil with a piece of camphor burning in the center and moving the plate up and around in front of the girl - before she enters her new home, and such rituals are some of the influences of cultural and religious, as well as caste traditions in the novels of R.K Narayan.

### **Issue of Communalism**

Narayan took up the theme of communal harmony for the first time in his novel “*A Tiger for Malgudi*” and refers to a scene of communal riot: “At another place we went into a rioting mob – groups of people were engaged in a bloody strife, attacking each other with stone, knife and iron rod and screaming murderous challenges. In their frenzy they had not noticed us, but when they did they dispersed swiftly” (Narayan, 1983).

Narayan then proceeded to enumerate and enunciate some of the well known causes of communal conflicts: “If you are ready to hate and want to destroy each other, you may find a hundred reasons – a diversion of canal water in your field, two urchins of opposite camps slapping each other, rumours of molestation of some women, even the right to worship in a temple, anything may spark off a fight if you are inclined to nurture hatred - only the foolish waste their lives in fights .....”.

It is easy to conclude from these views of Narayan that communal tensions are rooted in intolerance and hatred, which are the outcome of caste and religious prejudices. All the religions preach love; however at the same time they practice hate. The novelist seems to establish this fact by projecting the other side of the coin. He questions as to how else we could explain communal conflict in the name of religion, Christians crusading in the past against Muslims, Muslims waging jihad against non-believers, Hindus engaging themselves in *Dharmyudh* against *mlechhas* and caste wars between castes? Our society has provided us ample evidence that no matter how much love religions teach, in actual practice they spread hatred. He argues that when you place a religious procession of one community passing by the place of worship of another, this is often an occasion for mischief and a starting point of communal conflict, rooted in self-interest, it is maliciously intended to exploit religions for political purposes.

Narayan’s characters are not freed from the feeling of communalism. The glimpses of these feelings are evident in *Swami and Friends*, when the Christian teacher Mr. Ebenezar scolds his Hindu students:

“Oh, wretched idiots”, the teacher said, clenching his fists” (Narayan, 2000).

“Why do you worship dirty lifeless wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No. Can they see? No. can they bless you? No. Can they take you to heaven? No. Why? Because, they have no life. What did your Gods do when Mohammed of Gazni smashed them to pieces, trod upon them, and constructed out of them steps for his lavatory.

“If those idols and images had life, why did they not parry Mohammed onslaught?” He then turned to compare Jesus with Lord Krishna, “Next moment his face became purple with

rage as he thought of Sri Krishna: ‘Did our Jesus go about stealing butter like that arch scoundrel Krishna? Did our Jesus go gadding about with dancing girls like your Krishna? Did our Jesus practice dark tricks on those around him?’”

Swami is also not freed from communal feelings against Christianity.

Swaminathan’s blood boiled. He got up and asked, “If he did not, why was he crucified? Swaminathan put to him another question, “If he was a God, why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine? As a Brahmin boy it was inconceivable to him that a God should be a non-vegetarian. In answer to this, Ebenezer left his seat, advanced slowly towards Swaminathan and tried to wrench his left ear off.”

He could have spoken kindly, and given the answers very gently, but he decided to shout insults and pull the boy’s ears, which was not the way of showing any love or kindness, like he was supposed to do, if he had really followed the teachings of Jesus.

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Bharati tells Sriram, “Don’t ask whether they are Muslim children or Hindu children or who they are. It is no use asking that; we don’t know. We have given them only the names of flowers and birds. Bapuji [Gandhi] said once that even a number would be better than a name, if a name meant branding a man as belonging to this religion or that. . . . These children must grow up only as human beings.” Passages such as these clearly distinguish Narayan’s Gandhian community from contemporary far-right communalism, which equates a Hindu-only localism with Indian national identity (Narayan, 1955).

According to Pousse (1990) Gandhian ideology militates against ascribed “categorical identities,” which set up invidious “in-group/out-group” divisions, and instead stresses interactive “practical identities,” which are based upon “the entire complex of habits, expectations, abilities, routines that integrate one’s daily activities with those of a community.”

By the end of the novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Sriram and Bharati have created just such practical identities for themselves and, by extension, their children; as he observed, “the life [they] embark on so happily is Gandhi’s proper memorial, for this achievement was to instill in his followers a sense of social responsibility”.

## Conclusion

Narayan in his novels has limited his characters to the cultural limitations of the India of that time and those male characters were often very weak and they could not break the barriers of the strong cultural effects. The culture was mainly the strict following of the caste system, creed and religion and any change or new traditions were strongly opposed. Narayan, in his novels, upholds the Hindu traditions and does not support mixed marriages, meaning inter-caste and inter-religion marriages. Narayan raised the issue of caste in Indian culture and tried to show the disparity of caste and differences of religion which still bring impediments to legitimate and valid marriages among the Hindus in India. Disparity of caste and creed are an insurmountable obstacle in a Hindu marriage in India, in Narayan's novels. The two most important time-honoured categorical imperatives of Hindu Society are Varna and Ashrama.

Apart from caste, there was a strong feeling of patriotism in the hearts of Indians and they were revolting against the British domination and power. Narayan beautifully depicts the characters as having a strong love of their country, despite the fact the characters are not very strong as individuals. Narayan also evaluated and exposed the issues of communalism in his various novels.

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