

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 3 March 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Abstract

R. K. Narayan's fiction reflects the Indian traditions and culture, especially traditions of South India. The novelist's locale is Malgudi, an imaginary town somewhere in South India. Traditional concepts of typical Tamil Brahmin families, myths, status of Hindu gods and goddesses are evident in R. K. Narayan's novels. The main characters are linked to these traditions. There are occasional glimpses of other Tamil cultural values, social norms, orthodoxies and superstitions, which are all well protected. The readers may find Malgudi linked between traditional and modern era. Besides conserving the traditions of South Indian heritage, there are also records of latest advancements and new visions in the created world of R. K. Narayan.

Key Words: R.K. Narayan, Malgudi, Socio-culture, Tamil

Vanguard of Indian Writing in English

R. K. Narayan's life spanned the twentieth century, which meant that he belonged both to the old world and the new. During the time of his birth the British Raj was firmly in place and, in his later years, a totally free and independent nation of India was born and flourishing.

The British presence in India had brought with it a large civil service, an educational system, and railways – all of these institutions the people of the subcontinent embraced with enthusiasm. But it had also brought with it a language as well as a literature which that language created. These also proved to be a very productive legacy.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 3 March 2011

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

The British brought English to India and Indians clothed it with a literary tradition, which continues to delight and enrich us to this day. R. K. Narayan was one of the chief pillars of this Indian-coined tradition within literature that used English as the medium. Contemporary writers such as Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, or Anita Desai, whose novels have given such pleasure to readers in Europe and North America, stand rooted in a tradition which R. K. Narayan, as one of the early Indian novelists to write in English, did a great deal to establish. Ali (1986) did the stylistic analysis of Narayan's English in *The Guide*, focusing on the combination of ironic comment and comic manner. He found Indianism in the style of writing. There was a fusion of English syntactic patterns and Tamil speech rhythm, compounding to give an impression of Indian culture.

Nature of the Socio-cultural Contexts in R. K. Narayan's Novels

Through his novels R. K. Narayan portrayed Indian society and culture as he viewed them. Within the Indian society, his primary focus was on the Tamil and South Indian Hindu society. For demonstrating the socio-cultural pattern in the Tamil community (especially the Tamil Brahmin community), he created the world of Tamil atmosphere by giving Tamil and other familiar South Indian names to his characters, like Swami, Purohit, Veena, Pooja, Malathi, Raju, Rajam, Pandit, Nataraj, Sastri, Lakshmi, Saraswathi, etc. The other names are Mani, Vasu, Sampath, Krishnan, Susila, etc. These names show that his focus was especially on Hindu way of life.

Narayan's novels have heroes like **Swami, Chandran, Krishnan, Sampath, Margayya, Raju and Jagan** and these are typically Indian Hindu names. The novels assume and reveals the notions, feelings, taboos and morals of Indian culture, mostly as portrayed through the Brahmin community.

Side by Side: The Vernacular World and the World of Modernity

Killam (1976) emphasized that the characters of Narayan live partly in a vernacular world of Hindu tradition and partly in modernity experiencing change through western influences.

Socio-cultural pattern of Tamil community is reflected in the nature, characters, habits, situations and events in Narayan's novels. Narayan's characters reveal Indian traditions and morals. Some of his characters, even with foreign names, are Indian in their spirit. Or it may be correct to say that they have adapted themselves in the Indian context.

For example, **Grace**, an American-Korean girl introduced to be daughter-in-law of the hero, Jagan of *The Vendor of Sweets* (Narayan, 2000), was shown doing all the household work including sweeping, cooking food, etc. She decorates the floor with flower and colour for the sake of *puja* in Indian style. She was even fond of wearing sarees. It is portrayed that she loved the Indian traditions and culture even when she was in America.

Conflict of Attitudes and Loyalties

Swami and Friends, notable for its highly readable prose and understated humour, presents, among other things, the conflict between cultures: the Indian and the British. Through an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 3 March 2011

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

opening scene, *i.e.* Swami's "Scripture period" at Albert Mission School, R. K. Narayan narrates some details about Indian history and culture. There is a conflict in the passage sparked by Ebenezer, a British teacher. Swami seems to accept that he must attend Bible classes as part of his education, finding some of the stories interesting. However, he becomes angry by Ebenezer's condescending attitude toward Indians and disrespect for India's religions. Insulted by Ebenezer's word choices ("dirty," "lifeless") and contempt ("wretched idiots"), Swami poses complex questions to his teacher to embarrass him.

Swami is a Brahmin boy, and his caste has the highest ranking among all Hindu castes within the Hindu society. However, the teacher, being British, pays no regard to Swami's caste, which is very normal within British attitude in the 20th century. In addition, Swami, being a Brahmin and Hindu, is a vegetarian. For this reason, "it was inconceivable to Swamy that a God should be a non-vegetarian." The story is narrated from the perspective of the members of upper castes. The episode, however, fully characterizes the reality of attitudes then prevalent among the higher Indian caste groups.

Detailed Glimpses of Traditions

We get some detailed glimpses of Indian traditions and cultural beliefs in *The Financial Expert* (Narayan, 1952). The decoration of the floor before Margayya undergoes the ordeal of penance to appease Saturn and propitiate the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi is a notable description. The writer presents the Hindu view that Lakshmi and Saraswathi are rivals and are in constant competition for supremacy. He narrates the story of Kubera, the richest man in the world. Narayan strongly supported the values of Indian culture through this novel. Here he described how an entirely materialistic individual and an educated economist, Margayya, devoted one full month on worshipping goddess Lakshmi for his economic benefits and prosperity. Similarly, books were considered to be a physical form of goddess *Saraswathi* by Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* (Narayan, 2000).

Myths

The use of myth in various novels of Narayan, especially in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* also narrates the culture of the Malgudians and the way they relate the natural things with the names and belongings of gods, demons, *etc* (Bhushan, 1983).

Altruism in Narayan's Novels

The habit of hospitality and giving comfort to the guests in spite of all inconvenience to the host (*i.e.* altruism) is another form of Tamil culture. For example, Vasu, the villain of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (Narayan, 1962) had almost imposed himself on Nataraj, the printer much like Rosie, the heroine of *The Guide*, who comes to the hero, Raju (Narayan, 1958) seeking shelter. Raju provided her with all comforts beyond his limits in the same way as Velan and other villagers had accommodated the guests. Swami and arranged for the meals.

In Narayan's novels, altruism dominates over selfishness. The personal and temporal gains were sacrificed for general and permanent gains. The beard, rosary, vague language and assertive attitude of Raju, the hero of the novel, *The Guide* is the representative of Indian *swamis*.

Focus is more on Description

The poverty, ignorance of people and illiteracy are also reflected in the novels of Narayan as episodes to help the progress of narration and to provide humor. The red-tapism of Government officers and the unplanned scheme of life also reflect the typical Indian background in Narayan's novel. The picture of village teacher portrayed in *The Guide* reflects the rural practices. Raju's father never wrapped in paper the things he sold. Raju's mother kept in a box a number of costly *sarees*, but never wore them except on exceptional occasions. Rosie was obsessed with the thoughts of her husband Marco reflecting typical Indian wife. The temple, astrology, fate, the *Gita*, *pujas* and rituals in the family reflect clearer picture of Indian socio-cultural phenomenon. The symbolism is also a link in this chain.

Symbols and Rituals

Narayan uses symbols, which represent typical Tamil culture or temperament. Temple, *charkha*, river, excessive credulity and faith symbolize the cultural part of South India. Similarly, things like sofa set, studio, typewriter and skepticism are the specialties of new culture. The building of a railway station at Malgudi introduces the hurry and flurry of modern life in Malgudi.

The belief in fasting and faith in gods and goddesses reflect the faith and mannerism of culture and society of Tamils. Due to fasting, a new person was born in Raju, who is ready to sacrifice himself to save the life of other people. Fast means indifference to food, which is a symbol of material and mundane things. Thereby, when Raju decided to go on fast, thoroughly convinced of his needs and sanctity, he became a Mahatma.

In *The Vendor of Sweets* (Narayan, 2000), the father-son clash symbolizes the cultural clash between the East and the West and is represented through *charkha* and typewriter. Jagan holding *Gita* in his hand is well contrasted with America-trained son. Jagan could not believe that a man can live with a girl without marrying her. In *The Guide*, the attitude of Raju's uncle towards dancing and Raju's own opinion on *Bharatnatayam* as an art business was just opposite. Similarly, the villagers have faith in their culture, whereas modern educated man like Marco has love for the history of ancient India for the sake of promoting scholarship. Such contrasts abound in the novels of R. K. Narayan.

In the novels, *The English Teacher* (Narayan, 1945), *The Dark Room* (Narayan, 1938) and *The Financial Expert*, Narayan describes the idea of worshipping God or god, as such worship fulfills wishes and brings peace and prosperity. In *Mr. Sampath* (Narayan, 1949) Sampath's madness is cured in the spiritual atmosphere of the temple. The mystical potency of temple is also presented in *The Guide*. The transformation in the persona of Raju occurred in the temple only.

The author uses symbols like temple, river, village, caves, snakes and dance to portray an authentic picture of Indian life. These symbols are structurally necessary and also depict India's dominant sensibility.

The Joint Family

As a descriptive narrator of stories, Narayan portrays the joint family in several novels. It is difficult to brand Narayan as a supporter or opponent of the joint family system. Narayan writes from within a community where joint family has been the norm. Swaminathan, Chandran, Krishnan, Nataraj, Ramani, Raju, Sampath, Margayya, Jagan, Sriram and Raman, are usually the members of Hindu joint families. They have strong bonds and attachment to their protective parents, children, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. The individuals of Narayan's novel grew up or grow up in the joint family environment and their characters are shaped by the overwhelming influence of the members of the joint family. The character has to defer to the decisions of the elders in his or her family, even in crucial matters like choosing a career and spouse. The family itself observes the age-old customs, traditions and beliefs of the Hindu religion.

But Narayan does portray the problems and inconvenience of the joint family system as well, at least in some small measure in a humorous way. For example, Raju's mother serves food to the maternal uncles in different rooms to avoid clashes between them. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Mali and Jagan get different kinds of food cooked for themselves by the joint family and eat their food separately.

Horoscopes and Marriages

Marriage patterns in Narayan's novels also reflect the socio-cultural life of Tamil community. There is a common belief that marriages are made in heaven but they are normally arranged by the parents or the elders of the family. The consent of the son and the daughter is not to be considered necessary unless, he or she grumbles or rebels against their decision.

Despite the odds of mismatching horoscopes in the novel *The English Teacher*, Krishnan loves and marries Susila, a girl of his caste. Raju's mother in *The Guide* seriously 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. She cannot tolerate her presence into her house and threatened to leave it.

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan was shocked when his son Mali "imports" an American girl and intends to marry her. He cannot accept the idea of his son living with a girl without marrying her and that too not of his own caste. He didn't accept her as his daughter-in-law and he was restless until he booked the girl's passage back to America. Similarly, Raman, in *The Painter of Signs* has to contend with this traditional force embodied in his aunt, who is against inter-caste and inter-religion marriage.

Astrology and Astrologer

Another aspect of the socio-cultural pattern of Tamil community was the importance of *kundli* and horoscope, playing a decisive role in the settlement of Hindu marriage. Narayan's own marriage and marriage of some of his protagonists like Krishnan, in the autobiographical novel, *The English Teacher* or Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* (Narayan, 2000), suffer a serious setback on account of the horoscopes, which do not match. The priest was bribed to find the way out and marriage takes place only after a clearance from him.

In *The Painter of Signs* (Narayan, 1976), horoscopes are not consulted. The hermit of the temple forecasts Raman's relationship with Daisy: "That's an omen which means success but trouble before and after."

In *Mr. Sampath*, an astrologer was called to find a suitable date for the inauguration of the proposed film, *The Burning of Kama*. With the situation in *The Financial Expert* it is more ludicrous. Firstly, Margayya takes his horoscope to a priest to find out if it is in his stars to be wealthy. Later, when Balu is to be married to a rich daughter of the owner of tea-estates, Margayya kicks the first astrologer out when he says the horoscopes do not match. Subsequently, he bribes the more pliable astrologer and gets the verdict of the Heavens according to his own wishes.

As a descriptivist narrator of stories, Narayan does not fail to include arguments from both the sides, with wit and humor.

Woman's Place in Society

In Tamil society, a woman's proper place is the house and the hearth. She must confine herself to the domestic duties and to give proper care to her husband and children in a bid to retain respect in the family and society. She must be a dutiful and loving wife and she must raise her children well. She must be submissive and cooperative and should tolerate the excesses and deviations of her husband from the conjugal norms. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri is furious with herself and the helplessness of the traditional Indian wives. Her outburst to express their miserable plight is touching.

What despicable creation of God are we that we can't exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it (Narayan, 1938).

While, this novel reflects marital disharmony, *The English Teacher* is marked by a perfect marital harmony between Krishnan and Susila. Here, Narayan creates an ideal Hindu wife according to the accepted Hindu concept of a married woman. Later in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Narayan (1983) defines the role of an ideal wife when the Swami's wife goes to him and pleads for resolution of her conjugal rights.

"Husband, husband, husband, I'll repeat it a thousand times and won't be stopped. I know to whom I am talking. Don't deceive me or cheat me. Others may take you for a hermit. But, I know you intimately. I have borne your vagaries patiently for a lifetime. Your inordinate demands of food and my perpetual anxiety to see you satisfied and my total surrender nights or day when passion sized you and you displayed the indifference of a savage, never caring for my health or inclination and with you crude jocularities even before the children, I shudder! ..."

"Come home with me, I'll accept you as you are, keep your beard and loin cloth, only let me have my husband at home. ..."

The man-woman relationship in Tamil is not so free and uninhabited as it is in the West. Here the lover has to suffer from the inquisitive eyes and questioning comments of family members and neighbours. Raman (Narayan, 1983; *The Tiger for Malgudi*) is furious at his aunt, who guards him so zealously and at the scrutinizing watchfulness of the people, who peer into his private life, his love affair with Daisy.

This was a wretched part of the town, he wondered for a moment whether he should not sell his old house and take up his residence in a more civilized area like the New Extension or leave Malgudi itself this conservation town unused to modern life (Narayan, 1976).

Old Age

Old age is a respectful stage in life in Tamil socio-culture. Old persons, especially grandfathers and grandmothers are highly respected in the society. Narayan had great feelings and consideration for old age. He admires Raja, the tiger, for his old age in *A Tiger for Malgudi* (Narayan, 1983).

“Raja, old age has come on you. Beautiful old age, when facilities are dimmed one by one, so that we may be restful, very much like extinguishing lights in a home one by one before one goes to sleep. The Master goes on to add, “No relationship human or other, or association of any kind of life right from the mother’s womb. One has to accept it if one has to live in God’s plan”.

Narayan looks at Old Age in his novels as time to harvest the rich experience to help others. Some examples are: Swami’s granny, Krishnan’s mother, Sriram’s grandmother and Raman’s aunt. The Tamils attach great importance to renunciation and asceticism. The *siddhas*, *yogis* and *sanyasis* who embody the ideals of *tyaga* and *tapasya* in life are held in high esteem. They are supposed to have acquired miraculous powers through their austerity, meditation and self-discipline.

Traditional and Reactionary?

Ian Almond (2001) pointed out that although Narayan was often viewed as a traditional writer, he did not straightforwardly valorize a timeless tradition versus the exigencies of modernity: rather, his stories oscillate “between the modernity which disappoints and the traditions which stultify”. Perhaps Narayan’s investment is not in tradition *per se*, but in a contrast of industrialism and materialism with Gandhian social norms.

According to Rama Jha (1983), “If Narayan upholds the traditional Indian values in his novels, they are certainly not of the *Upanishadic* or of the later *Brahmanic* kind, which states that the world is a *maya*, and renunciation of which in order to realize the identity of Self with the Ultimate is the highest wisdom . . . [rather,] as in the Gandhian (Michel Pousse, 1990) view of life, the sociopolitical world remains a reality to be comprehended and tackled”.

Numerous critics labeled Narayan as a straightforwardly traditional and even reactionary writer. According to Waterloo (2002), despite this opposition to prevailing critical wisdom,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 3 March 2011

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

Narayan's ideological vision is thoroughly conventional: "Narayan's ideological stance is fundamentally reactionary: he offers through his fiction a vision of stasis, a stratified, caste-oriented India, struggling against the encroaching values of modernism".

References

- Ali, S. (1986). The Use of English in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. *Commonwealth Quarterly* 11(32): 1-13.
- Ian Almond (2001). Darker Shades of Malgudi: Solitary Figures of Modernity in the Stories of R. K. Narayan. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36(2): 113.
- Bhushan, K. (1983). The Use of Myth in R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. *Chandrabhaga* 9&10: 81-88.
- Rama Jha (1983). *Gandhian Thought and Indo-Anglian Novelists*. p. 149.
- Killam, D. (1976). Notes on Adaptation and Variation in the Use of English in Writing by Haliburton, Furphy, Achebe, Narayan and Naipaul. In: Niven, Alastair (ed) *The Commonwealth Writer Overseas* Brussels: Didier. 121-128.
- Narayan, R.K. (1938), *The Dark Room*, Madarian Paperbacks, London, 1990. Page 123.
- Narayan, R.K. (1945). *The English Teacher*. Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1955, repr. 1989.
- Narayan, R.K. (1949). *Mr. Sampath – The Printer of Malgudi*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1956 plan to study , repr. 1985.
- Narayan, R.K. (1952). *The Financial Expert*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1958, repr. 1998.
- Narayan, R.K. (1958), *The Guide*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1963, repr. 1978. Page 172.
- Narayan, R.K. (1962). *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1968, repr. 2007. p. 240.
- Narayan, R.K. (1976) *The Painter of Signs*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982. Page 77.
- Narayan, R.K. (1983), *The Tiger for Malgudi*, Indian Thought Publications, Mysore, 1983, repr. 1993. Page 170.
- Narayan, R.K. (2000). *The Magic of Malgudi*. *Penguin Book*. Page 291.

Michel Pousse (1990): "R. K. Narayan as a Gandhian Novelist," *The Literary Criterion* 25:4 77-90.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 3 March 2011

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

Waterloo, O. (2002). *Counterrealism and Indo-Anglian Fiction*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press. 21

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Department of English

M.P. Garg Degree College

Allahabad-211011

Uttar Pradesh, India

shakeba.siddiqui@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 3 March 2011

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui, Ph.D.

Socio-cultural Patterns of the Tamil Brahmin Community in the Novels of R. K. Narayan