

R. K. Narayan as a Pragmatic Essayist

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Abstract

The first Indian novelist in English of International repute was neither Salman Rushdie nor the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul but R. K. Narayan. He has no philosophical or socialistic concern and he is rooted in his limited world. He is primarily preoccupied with man's filling of the life-role entrusted to him by tradition and environment. This aspect is reflected in his Prose-Writings like 'Mysore', 'Emerald Route', 'Next Sunday', 'Reluctant Guru', 'My Dateless Dairy' and 'My Days'. All are personal essays with 'Pragmatic' values for the readers of R. K. Narayan.

Keywords: Beef, capricious, Carnatic, caste system, customs, irony, joint-family system, paradox, prophet, reluctant, tradition.

Introduction

Indian writing in English is a living and evolving literary aspect. It is richer in content and wider in range. It has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives that have impacted and governed its study since the time of its inception. At the earlier stage the fictional works of the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan were the main works. Besides fiction, these authors were also good Non-Fictional essayists to some extent. R. K. Narayan's popularity as a fictional writer, both at home and abroad, led most of his readers-and even his critics not recognize the existence of his Prose or Non-Fiction writings. Narayan's language is very lucid, transparent, vivid and racy. He uses simple English and never attempts to mix the flavour of Tamil or any other Indian language into it. There is no distortion of the rules of English grammar. He uses a lot of Indian words in his writings. He uses common Indian Idioms without bringing any change in their structure. His language is perfectly capable of presenting ideas. So everyone can read and comprehend his essays. They are 'Pragmatic in value'.

Works of Non-Fiction

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Narayan is the author of some six works of non-fiction. They are categorized into three, with two of each kind in a category. They are:

1. Mysore (1944)} Travel
2. The Emerald Route: Passage through Karnataka (1987)} Literature
3. Next Sunday-Sketches and Essay (1956)} Discursive
4. Reluctant Guru-illustrious essay (1974)} Essays
5. My Dateless Dairy: An American Journey (1960)} Personal
6. My Days: A Memoir (1975/1989)} Records of life.

They also mark roughly three periods in R. K. Narayan's literary career as a non-fiction writer, in conception and execution of the ideas that go into these books, namely, the Early, the Middle and Later periods. The first two books deal wholly with the State, now known as **Karnataka**; the two books in the second category expand into his observations of topics of contemporary nature; and the last two are autobiographical works with appeal beyond national boundaries. Likewise, the audiences to which the works of these three categories are of interest extend from "Mysoreans" or "Kannadigas", to all Indians and all readers of Narayan, including the international. There is a progressive rising literary value in them from the first to the last work.

'Mysore' and 'The Emerald Route':

The first two books, 'Mysore' and 'The Emerald Route', are both a sort of travel account and have little value as literary works and less as travel guides. Both are records of the author's personal impressions and legends of the chosen places. "Mysore" is not a book of facts about Mysore State. It is just a collection of impressions descriptions, legends and historical tit-bits. This is entirely a personal record of R. K. Narayan's tour and studies. He recounts fully the history and circumstances of writing "Mysore". The same is also repeated in his book "My Days".

"The Emerald Route" is mostly a verbatim repetition of 'Mysore' with some additions and changes necessitated by Mysore expanding into 'Karnataka'. This is his narration of the legends of the places he toured. Occasionally, his account becomes moving, like his description of the battle between Tippu Sultan and the British army as in 'Mysore'. In 'The

Emerald Route', there is a dramatic piece, "watchman of the lake". But this play lacks appeal and is ineffectual. As travel guides, the books are little help to would-be-travellers. No doubt, they certainly excite imagination in the readers.

"Next Sunday" and "Reluctant Guru":

One of Narayan's ardent desires was to write discursive essays, and his two books, '*Next Sunday*' and '*Reluctant Guru*' are an ample expression of the fulfilment of this desire. They contain essays selected from those originally written for the Sunday edition of 'The Hindu' for about 20 years and for magazines both within India and outside, and selection from these books and others are put together in *A Writer's Nightmare* (1988) and *A Story-Teller's World* (1989). Inspired by Charles Lamb, these essays espoused the cause of the common man and cover widely varying topics of interest to readers. These essays are marked by simplicity of sentence structure, uncomplicated language without daunting depth of thought, chatty but felicitous style, apt diction, pleasing brevity and enlivening observations spiced with a frequent touch of pungent humour, irony or wit. These essays make for ideal relaxed Sunday reading. Several of the essays expound Narayan's sustained and unbroken loyalty to English and its need for India. He advocates 'English is Indian' or 'Swadeshi'. It should be indianised.

Narayan's *Next Sunday: Sketches and Essays* is a collection of fifty-five essays. They reveal his capacity to choose a wide variety of topics and make worthwhile observation using varied approaches to his topics. A look at some of the essays illuminates this point. The title essay *Next Sunday* is strongly placed near the end of the book. Here Narayan says that everyone looks forward to Sunday. It is a day on which there are many things to do. A man plans to do the work of 48 hours on that day. He wants to get up late. But he is disturbed and gets up in a disappointed mood. It is not a good way to start the day. The charm of the day is lost at the very start. But the time he begins his work, the Sunday is nearly gone. He remembers his promises to his family for outing. He says to his children to stay at home that day. He promises to take his family out 'The Next Sunday'. This essay reminds us of Charles Lamb's essay *Dream Children* which is full of pathos. *Government Music* is a biting satire on Indian bureaucratic procedures and India's policy of nationalising virtually everything. The sharp practices of astrologers and street fortune-tellers, who exploit credulous people, are deftly exposed in *Prophets in our Midst*. *Allergy* is a playful exercise

of pure wit, and *The Need for Silence* is a scathing comment on the incurable itch of politics speakers and their haranguing. His essay *Two-Way-Democracy* makes an impish suggestion for 'de-election' by voters on recalling unwanted politicians already elected. The essay "*On Knowledge*" is cleverly built around the paradox: "The Test of a man's worth will ultimately have to be not how much he knows, but how much he has avoided knowing". The solemn dissertation on the donkey focuses on the sad plight of a docile animal. *A Bookish Topic* is a skilful analysis of the play of the artful dodger who is unwilling to return the books he has borrowed. *Tears of Crocodile* is a whimsical essay in which the crocodile, much maligned by man sought for its skin, artfully tells its side of the story. *Headache* is a capricious essay diagnosing the diplomatic subterfuge used commonly to detach oneself from a disagreeable duty. In *The Crowd* the author says that he likes crowd. He likes crowd at a temple festival. The misanthrope hates a crowd, misses the charm of life. In the essay *Coffee*, the author describes the story of coffee and the way it came to India. Finally *Upstartism* is a study of human behaviour in an upstart. Thus R. K. Narayan's early essays cover a range of subjects of common phenomenon. They bear a remarkable likeness to the style and manner of Addison and Steele, Lamb and Goldsmith.

Reluctant Guru is a collection of forty essays. They are further testimony to Narayan's ability to write engagingly on any topic of his choice relevant to Indians. Here the Reluctant Guru is the author himself. The title essay "Reluctant Guru" reveals his reluctance to play the all-knowing at a Mid-Western University in America before the students and faculty and his evasive answers. More importantly, his essay *Children* show his concern for children in India, who are poorly treated by their elders. In both *A Trouble-free World* and *Musical Musings*, he indulges in an inquisitive mood. His essay *Indignation* is the birth right of every human being. *Murder of Pleasure* is another essay from R. K. Narayan, which is thought-provoking study in which he wonders how a detective story, which begins with a murder, and a tragedy which concluded with a killing, can be a source of pleasure. In a characteristic manner, he pokes gentle fun at Indian bureaucracy in *A Ministry of Worry*. *Our Possessions* is a humorous comment on people's all-too-common foible of acquiring things only to lose them or their use. In *My Educational Outlook* he severely criticises the Indian educational system. *The Greatest Common factor* is a well-meant encomium of the postman. He is the greatest common factor in humanity. He is the greatest repository of all men's hopes, fears and joys.

On the whole, both books *Next Sunday* and *Reluctant Guru* are abundant testimony to Narayan's imaginative thinking, social commitment and playful use of wit, irony and humour.

My Dateless Dairy

It is informative and we get to know Narayan as a practising writer and the American response to his works. It is a delightful exercise. It is the study of the cultural differences which Narayan observed, experienced and recorded. The travelogue begins with his days in New York. The self-service cafeteria reminds him of his own country where the waiter attends to you. Narayan was often intrigued by the question what happens to an Indian when he gets culturally mixed up. The story of Govind, an Indian friend seems to answer his query. Govind hailed from an orthodox Brahmin family in Bombay. He had come to USA seven years ago for higher studies. Then he fell in love with a European girl and married her much to the disgust of his parents. His father ostracized him from the ancient family. Govind took all this calmly and settled with his wife. But he still clings to his orthodox and remained a vegetarian. This created domestic complexities and he finally took to American food. Beef had an unexpected effect on him. But after about six years Govind felt terribly homesick. He wanted to return to India, but that was also a problem-since his wife was a foreigner. So he gets caught in the vicious circle and the problem remains unsolved. Govind, like most Indians find it difficult to return to homeland. R.K.Narayan remained a teetotaler even in America. It was difficult to get purely vegetarian food in America but he managed to get rice, curd and curry. Narayan himself felt Madras in Chicago. Mrs. Singer had prepared South Indian food for him. They also discussed about Madras personalities and Carnatic Music. Milton played records of Kharma on Veena and vocal recital of M.S.Subbalakshmi. Narayan also attended a sitar recital by Pt. Ravi Shankar at the annexe of the museum of Modern Art.

On another occasion, Narayan recounts the joy he felt in meeting his friend Dr M. N. Srinivas. Srinivas was an eminent Indian sociologist at Oxford on a visit to Chicago. Narayan also had a taste of racial discrimination in America. While boarding a bus at Monteaagle, he saw the bus depot displayed in its waiting hall 'For Coloured' and 'For

Whites' notices. Even in the bus it was whites first. The conductors so manoeuvred that the coloured men could board only after the White were seated.

Incidents from the *Diary* indicate that the Americans were curious to know about Indian political leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. They also questioned Narayan about the Caste System, the Joint Family system and issues related to religion. They were especially interested in talking about religion, mysticism, evolution and re-incarnation. Narayan's meeting with Greta Garbo is perhaps one of the most fascinating episodes. Her enquiry about the purpose of life and the meaning of creation was so earnest that Narayan shared with her the power of meditation and the Gayatri mantra. A press reporter once asked Narayan what could save the American Civilization. Then he was puzzled that Americans have everything in the world yet they are unhappy. Their suicide and divorce rates were rising at an alarming rate. This oppressed reporter wanted a solution to this unhappy state of affairs. Narayan then emphasized the need of meditation and prayer. R. K. Narayan's portrayal of his countrymen in America is mostly accurate.

Thus, "*My Dateless Dairy*" has the qualities of autobiography, travelogue and novel packed into one.

My Days

It depicts the happenings in R. K. Narayan's life. It is written in a lucid manner which is enjoyable by all. It reveals his sensitive and observant personality. It has 'three-fold literary value': it sheds light on his early struggle and preparation to become a writer and it provides details of the circumstances surrounding the composition of some of his works. For the most part, it is a straightforward narration. Anyone interested in R. K. Narayan's life and work can profit from reading it. He received in person the 1974 English Speaking Union and Books Abroad Literary Award for *My Days*.

Narayan's account of his childhood is delightful and is reminiscent of his "Swami and Friends". His schooldays are described with profound details. His shifting from Madras to Chennapatna and back again to Madras, the frequent transfers from school to school is all chalked out with great sincerity. He did not pass his university entrance examination till 1926 and it was during this time that Narayan has become an ardent reader of English literature. Left free for a whole year he read whatever he could. He started writing at this

time but did not seriously take it up. Having graduated in 1930, through the influence of his father, Narayan was appointed as a teacher at a government school in Chennapatna. His career as a school teacher lasted for two days. Back home at Mysore, he became an object of much speculation. Then he started his first novel “*Swami and Friends*” (1935). He worked systematically and wrote “each day, perhaps a two hundred words”.

The most memorable event in Narayan’s life occurred in July 1933 when he had gone to Coimbatore escorting his elder sister. It was there that he saw a girl drawing water from the street-tap and immediately fell in love with her. But the horoscopes did not match, yet the hurdle was overcome with the help of another astrologer and the marriage was celebrated. Narayan’s personal experience of the incompatibility of the horoscopes and the hurdles in love and marriage are drawn upon in the novel, “*The Bachelor of Arts*”. Soon after he became a reporter for a newspaper, “*The Justice*” and lasted in the profession for a year. His first novel was published in the October 1935 with the help of a British novelist, Graham Greene. Later his wife departed from this world in 1939. The personal tragedy of losing his wife of Narayan was recorded in his novel “*The English Teacher*”. It is autobiographic in content. He further provides the details of the filming “*The Guide*” and also the stage adaptation. Thus “*My Days*” is a neat and cogent self-protection without fallacies and inhibitions. To conclude in the words of Graham Greene “Narayan is the Novelist I most admire in the English language. His autobiography is worthy of his novels”. “*My Days*” will make everyone smile, shed a tear and feel sorry when it ends.

Critique

R. K. Narayan’s recognition at home and abroad by academies is well known, especially because of his novels and short stories; but his non-fiction should not be overlooked, for it accurately reveals many different aspects of the author’s life and thought, interests and style. All have Pragmatic Value in reader’s life.

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