

Abstract:

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001), a novelist of international repute and recipient of many awards, has virtually become synonymous with Indian English literature. Of course, his remarkable gift of story-telling, the special local flavor of his stories, the extraordinary assortment of odd, eccentric, yet charming characters, his own charming genial humor and highly enjoyable sparkling wit, his rootedness in Indian Myths, his objectivity, imaginative insight and sympathy-all contribute to his enduring popularity. However, another notable and important feature of Narayan's oeuvre is his presentation of India in transition and the effect that this process or period of change has on individuals. In this paper, I have endeavored to trace out the social, cultural and economic changes that have brought about the transition in Indian life on the basis of my reading of R.K. Narayan's three novels-The Dark Room (1938), The Guide (1958) and The Painter of Signs (1976). These three novels were published between 1938 and 1976- a period which saw not only the last phase of British Colonial rule in India and the subsequent emergence of independent India but also the birth of a completely new world order.

R.K. Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Chennai, South India and died on May 13, 2001. Thus, his life, more or less, has spanned the whole of the 20th century. So, it is quite natural a fact that R.K. Narayan has delineated the actual world which he himself has experienced and witnessed through his fictional world. Indeed, the novels of R.K. Narayan have achieved the highest position of glory, each of them being a delightful and transparent window into India. His novels float as gently as a lily pad on the surface of Indian life and still suggest the depth beneath. In almost all his novels, he has chosen matters of everyday life. He has seized the Indian mind fully with its superstitions, gullibility, bewildering contradictions. Ved Mehta maintains: "R. K. Narayan...manages by a miracle of perception and choice of detail to convey the Indian without a single false feeling or gesture (24)." Writing under the impact of growing industrialism and technology, he could not overlook the gross materialism of the age and the socio-economic realities of the Indian society. Narayan is a writer whose sympathies and ideals do not isolate him from his socio-historical moorings. In fact, in all of R.K. Narayan's novels one clearly perceives the steady encroachment of modernity into the traditional tempo of life.

Almost all of R.K. Narayan's novels and short stories, including the three novels discussed in this paper, are set in the enchanting fictional territory of Malgudi, a typical South Indian town, and it has been presented in vivid and realistic details. Even its past history is given, and in successive novels, we see it changing, growing and becoming different from earlier. Professor C.D.Narasimhaiah observes: "Malgudi is the microcosm of traditional Indian society (136)." It is, in fact, the symbol of Indian reality. The Indianness and Indian sensitivity pervade the whole of Malgudi. It grows and develops, and expands and changes, and is full of humanity, drawing its sustenance from the human drama enacted in it. What happens in Malgudi, happens all over India with different regional nuances and shifts. The underlying situation in the novels of Narayan is real to all Indians and it is intimately linked to their immediate psychic awareness and social experience. They are not confined to local political and social issues but are concerned with the changing socio-political and socio-cultural influences affecting the daily life of an Indian. Cynthia Vanden Driesen holds: "Malgudi reflects a quality of the larger world (61)." What is true of Malgudi is true of India. Though a fictional town, Malgudi reflects the aroma of the whole Indian life. In fact, Narayan, in his novels, has depicted Malgudi as a typical Indian town in transition from a semi-agricultural town to a big industrial city and the change is symbolic of the change that was taking place in India as a whole.

The transition is noticeably reflected in Narayan's unique creation of a new class of women characters like Shanta Bai and Gangu in *The Dark Room*, Rosie in *The Guide*, and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*. These memorable women characters represent the emancipation and empowerment of women attained through the Women's Liberation Movement. The awareness of their individuality makes them struggle against the traditional society where Mythology is replete with the glorious tales of self-sacrificing women like Sita, Savitri and Behula, where women are always seen as objects of sex or evaluated on the basis of their relation to men, are more or less devoid of education and economic independence, and where the social structure is still patriarchal. Though Narayan shows the traditional women like Savitri and Janamma in *The Dark Room*, Raju's mother in *The Guide*, and Raman's aunt in *The Painter of Signs*, this sort of juxtaposition of traditional and transitional characters actually makes the transition sharper and more illuminating. For example; Savitri, a traditional suppressed Indian wife, also raises the feminist issue of the economic independence of women, in order to assert her independent personality:

What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education. Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend on their salvation on marriage. What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? -the prostitute changes her man, but a married woman doesn't; that's all, but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner. Yes, Kamala and Sumati must take their University course and become independent.[119-120]

Again, in *The Guide*, Raju's uneducated mother acknowledges the necessity of the empowerment of women when she says:

Girls today! How courageous you are! In our day we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort And I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive.[124]

A few moments later, Raju's mother is full of admiration for Rosie when she is informed of Rosie's being an M.A.:

Good, good, brave girl. Then you lack nothing in the world. You are not like us uneducated women. You will get on anywhere. You can ask for your railway ticket, call a policeman if somebody worries you, and keep your money. What are you going to do? Are you going to join government service and earn? Brave girl.[125]

In *The Dark Room*, we find Shanta Bai who was married to a gambler and drunkard at twelve. But when she found that her husband would not change, she left her husband and also her parents and with the help of an aunt, finally passed B.A. Since then she has been drifting about in quest of joining the outside work force, a desire that she subsequently fulfills by getting a job of a woman probationer in Engladia Insurance Company. When Shanta Bai joins the Engladia Insurance Company, Ramani, Savitri's bullying and over-possessive husband, also affirms the worth and potentiality of women and their right of getting equal treatment by saying:

It was all nonsense to keep men and women separate in water-tight compartments; women were as good as men and must be treated accordingly.[73]

Shanta Bai is not the only woman who has come out of the cocoon of orthodox social customs and conventions; she is, in reality, only one among the thousands of women like her which she herself affirms: "We find that there are thousands like us." [67] Another fascinating woman character in the novel is Gangu, a highly ambitious woman who wants to be a film star, a professional musician, a Malgudi delegate to the All-India women's conference and a Congress leader. She spends her days preparing for the fulfillment of one ambition or another. So, we find Gangu to be a champion of women's freedom. Then, Rosie, the female protagonist of the novel *The Guide*, also represents a new class of women, who have got the opportunity to be freed from the domestic confinement to join colleges and universities. She is a fascinating personality with extra-ordinary vitality. Her passion for dancing even impels her to come to Raju when her husband completely neglects her art of dancing and subsequently throws her out. She even becomes oblivious of the reaction of an orthodox Hindu society because of the fact that she lives entirely for her art, and those who enter her life must either become the willing instruments of her passion or suffer rejection. She leaves her husband because he takes no interest in her art; she falls for Raju because he appreciates and admires her art and helps her in her single-minded pursuit of it. At the end, she rises to new heights of popularity and stardom as a professional dancer even without Raju or her husband.

R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* most vividly exemplifies both modernization of woman and reversal of sex roles. Here, Daisy, being slender, high-minded, entirely independent, has made up her mind to be modern and is now dedicated to bringing birth control to the people of many country villages. In Daisy, Narayan has, perhaps, found the model of woman who would be prospering after Women's Liberation Movement. In fact, India is dragged into the 21st century by Narayan's artistic and skilful portrayal of Daisy, a birth control propagandist. To fulfill the mission of her life and to preserve her individual identity, she intentionally makes her marriage proposal fall through by her wayward behavior with the bridegroom at the time of her being inspected as a bride. Consequently, she leaves her parents' house and, later, even refuses to marry Raman, being determined to disregard the messy and wayward concern of the heart. Asked during an interview by S. Krishnan, how he came to give such an unorthodox cast of mind to his new heroine, so entirely different from Savitri of *The Dark Room*, Narayan explained:

In *The Dark Room* I was concerned with showing the utter dependence of woman on man in our society. I suppose I have moved along with the times. This girl in my new novel is quite different. Not only is she not dependent on man, she actually has no use for them as an integral part of her life. To show her complete independence and ability to stand by herself I took care not to give her a name with any kind of emotional connotation, I am calling her only Daisy. She is a very strong character.

Finally, the following outburst by Daisy confirms her steadfastness of character as an unorthodox and modern woman with a clear realization of her distinct potentiality and aptitude to fulfill her own mission of life.

Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman's life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve. I gave my word to the Reverend that I would not change my ideas...[124]

The next marked change is found in the changing attitude of the Indians towards education. I have already shown various women characters who have managed to preserve their individual identity and become economically independent mainly by getting themselves educated and enlightened. In *The Dark Room*, we find both Ramani and Savitri getting concerned about the proper education of their children, Babu, Kamala and Sumati in the Extension Elementary School. Again in *The Guide*, we come across the emergence and popularity of modern and scientific education over the traditional religious education at Sanskrit Toles. Here, Raju appears to be interested in studying in the fashionable Albert Mission School instead of Pyol School and, later, we notice the recent establishment of Albert Mission College which brings in more and more college going students at Malgudi. The newly established college has even prompted Raju to convert his railway stall into a bookstall. In fact, we see that the importance

of education had gradually got a firm grip and sway over the psyche of common Indians. This awareness of the importance of education even prompts the cart-driver, an uneducated old man, in *The Painter of Signs*, speak the following about his son:

But I didn't want him to be a driver of bulls. I wanted him to study, the teacher in our village said that he would be the most intelligent boy in the country...[67]

Again, this awareness makes Raman, the sign painter, declare himself to be a rationalist. He is even determined to establish the Age of Reason in an orthodox society that has its root in traditional customs and conventions. The narrator goes on:

I want a rational explanation for everything," he cried. "Otherwise my mind refuses to accept any statement." He was bursting with self-declarations. "I'm a rationalist, and I don't do anything unless I see some logic in it.[8]

Thus, it can be affirmed that this enlightened awareness and rational outlook resulting from the modernization of education has contributed a great deal in drawing out positive and welcoming response from the Indians towards various social changes.

In India, the spread of the light of education had a far-reaching impact in refining public taste in the arena of entertainment. And this change of outlook in entertainment is well reflected in the novels of R.K. Narayan. At first, Ramani, the protagonist of *The Dark Room* and the in-charge of the Engladia Insurance Company in Malgudi, enjoys playing tennis and billiard at the club. In this novel, Narayan's characters do enjoy long drives at night and night out to "The Palace Talkies" where besides Tamil films, films featuring Dietrich, Garbo, Laurel and Hardy are regularly screened. The narrative goes on:

Malgudi in 1935 suddenly came into line with the modern age by building a well equipped theatre-the Palace Talkies-which simply brushed aside the old corrugated sheet-roofed Variety Hall, which from time immemorial had entertained the citizens of Malgudi with tattered silent films.[26-27]

Even Babu sneers at the prospect of watching an Indian film based on Hindu Mythology. Rather, he shows his eagerness to watch "Curly Top" and "Frankenstein". Again, Shanta Bai complains to Ramani when they go together to see a film one night: "A wretched Indian film! I'd have given my life to see a Garbo or Dietrich now." [90] In *The Guide*, we find the increasing popularity of Malgudi as a tourist spot having countless beauty spots and historical curiosities. As a result, lots of tourists come to Malgudi to enjoy the scenic beauty of this place, a new and emerging source of enjoyment for the Indians in the 1950's. We also notice the refinement of public taste in entertainment when Rosie's performance as a professional classical dancer draws packed house at every corner of South India. Thus, changes in the field of entertainment are an integral part of the Indian reality as presented in the novels of R.K. Narayan.

Mid 20th century onwards, due to the development of science and technology, and with the process of industrialization and urbanization, various changes have been marked in India in the fields of tourism, media, medicine, transport, trade and commerce, agriculture and so on. R.K. Naraya's National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy winning novel, *The Guide* chronicles the arrival of the railway which symbolizes the growth of Malgudi from a small town to a big city. When the railway lines are laid and a station is built, Malgudi is connected with the outside world. This connection with the outside world has had a far-reaching impact on the development of tourism in this part. People from Mumbai, Chennai, and other places, hundreds of miles away, begin to gather at Malgudi, a place which is beset with innumerable beauty spots and historical and archeological sites. This spread of tourism also includes the development of other infrastructural facilities, like the establishment of hotels like Anand Bhavan Hotel and the Peak House Forest Bungalow, the construction of new roads, dams and bridges, the establishment of Malgudi Photo Bureau etc. Towards the end of *The Guide*, we get a glimpse of the development of media. When Raju, the protagonist of the novel, has been undertaking a fast for twelve days to bring down rain, we find numerous press-reporters swarming the place for sending their hour-to-hour reports of the event all over the world. We even notice the arrival of an American film and TV show producer, James J. Malone, who has come to shoot the total scenario of the fast and interview Raju. Then the inspectors of the Health Department are seen spraying every inch of space with DDT and, with needle in hand, coaxing people to inoculate themselves against cholera, malaria and what not. Film shows regarding mosquitoes, malaria, plague, and tuberculosis, and BCG vaccination are also screened to raise public awareness against these diseases. Again, in *The Painter of Signs*, we find Daisy, a health worker, working relentlessly to popularize the idea of family planning among the uneducated and superstitious villagers in the remotest part of India. These awareness-raising activities are expected to do a great deal in bringing about positive changes in the overall condition of health among the Indians. Changes have also been marked in agriculture in the form of increased productivity by utilizing the improved methods of cultivation. We get another glaring instance of change in Malgudi when R.K. Narayan narrates in *The Painter of Signs*:

.... Malgudi was changing in 1972. It was the base for a hydro-electric project somewhere on the Mempi Hills, and jeeps and lorries passed through the Market Road all day. The city had a new superintendent of police who was trying out new ideas. Policemen were posted every few yards. They seem to be excited at the spectacle of all this traffic, he thought, imagining that we are on the verge of disaster, I suppose, with pedestrians and vehicles bumping into each other.[13-14]

In this way, R.K. Narayan has effectively presented the true picture of post-war independent India by representing all these changes occurring there in his widely read novels.

The transition in India, as exhibited in the novels of R.K. Narayan, also includes changes in economy. The new economic and social integration, resulting from colonization, had actually

changed the economic structure of India. Being integrated into a colonial and global world-order, the Indians witnessed an economic resurgence and, turning away from a traditional agro-based economy, India's economy began its march toward mercantile economy. In *The Dark Room*, Ramani, the secretary of the Malgudi branch of the Engladia Insurance Company, brags about his contribution in the rise of business of the company by saying:

Madam, the Engladia Insurance Company is a big one, I admit, but it is not the only insurance company in the world. Before I took charge, Malgudi district was not giving them even ten rupees' worth of policies a year, and now ten lakhs of business is passing through my hands every year.(16)

The proud utterance above by Ramani clearly shows the then existing economic scenario with a new cash flow in the Indian market as a result of the establishment of new industries and foreign trade. Again, in *The Painter of Signs*, Raman, the protagonist, finds himself in a modern materialistic world in which everyone seems to be obsessed with money and sex. Here, everything is judged on the basis of money and 'strictly cash' is the most popular slogan of the emerging business world. The professor, in the novel, actually gives vent to his opinion about a money and business-minded world, when he says:

Strictly Cash-a message for the money-mad world. What is cash? What is strict...? No credit. Strictly, strictly, strictly, cash, cash, cash! That is what the world is coming to.[24]

Raman, the sign painter, also feels chocked in this changed order and tries to find a way out from the obsessive thoughts of money and sex. The narrator says:

He wanted to get away from sex thoughts, minimize their importance, just as he wished to reduce the importance of money. Money and sex, he reflected, obsessive thoughts, too much everywhere-literature, magazines, drama, or cinema deal with nothing but sex all the time....[15]

In this novel, we find that the Market Road is replete with innumerable shops like the bangle-seller's shop, Bhandari Stores, The Chettiar Stores, The Broadless restaurant, an arcade of some interesting little shops displaying all kinds of trinkets, flashlights, cuff-links, and so forth, most of them being tacitly approved smuggler's outlets for forbidden goods unloaded on deserted coasts. We can consider the Market Road as a miniature version of a real and large business center, which has been emerging in India under the impact of mercantile economy. Narayan is not also oblivious of "a thousand other sins"[14] and corruptions commonly prevailing in a modern materialistic India during the last quarter of the 20th century. He narrates:

What about the American milk powder meant for the orphans of India and sold on the black market? What about the government hospital surgeon who flourished his knife like an assassin and made money and acquired the much-coveted building sites beyond the railway crossing! And that wholesale grain-merchant who cornered all the rationed articles and ran the co-operative stores meant for the poor?[14]

Thus, R.K.Narayan, in his acclaimed novels, has shown a clear picture of his contemporary India in the arena of trade, commerce and economy with all the vicissitudes, which, in fact, largely account for many other changes in different sectors happening in India.

Finally, a close look will make it clear that when Narayan was born, India was under the British colonial rule. To be born an Indian at such a time involved being part of a somewhat complex and contradictory society. While being a citizen of a worldwide empire, one was also a member of a nation, which had been conquered. That gave rise to a particular form of cultural identity in which one was a part of a Metropolitan culture yet peripheral to it, a semi outsider. But, then there was one's own culture- in Narayan's case- traditional Hindu culture-, which gave him a very strong and complete identity, much stronger, in many ways, than the imposed culture of colonialism. This mixture of Hindu and British cultural influences actually made Narayan very much responsive and reactive to the changes occurring in India at that critical juncture of Indian history. That is why, Narayan sees South India as a fundamentally Hindu society changing under the impact of Western and modern ideas. For the same reason, when one goes through his novels, one becomes aware of a profoundly tradition-bound society giving in to the flux of modern Western way of life. In fact, modern India is seen as an inevitable and inescapable phenomenon. However, the mastery of Narayan lies in his overwhelming ability to maintain a delicate yet perfect balance between tradition and modernity. Despite being a traditionalist, observing the steady but explicit uprooting and the dragging of his own traditional culture into the cultural orbit of the West, Narayan seeks to modernize; and in the process of adopting, he has realized that, whether he wants it or not, he will, or must adopt certain of its values also. So, he rationalizes this acculturation by seeking antecedents for those modern values in his own traditional past. Thus, Narayan's vision of Indian reality is a harmonious blending of the old and the new, the wary and the impulsive, the rational and the irrational. In fine, we can claim that India, in R.K.Narayan's novels, becomes the arena of the traditional rhythm of life with the intrusion of modernity into it and the transition of India explored in this paper as represented in R.K.Narayan's novels has clearly shown a true picture of contemporary India.

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