Cultural and Religious Elements in the Fiction of R.K Narayana

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Abstract: R.K. Narayan is a writer of international repute. He deals with the Hinduism in his fictions. The present paper focuses on the socio-cultural elements which Narayan selects as the themes of his writings. He gives importance on the Hinduism and its spell on the life of an individual.

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R.K. Narayan has however a complete different career. He is very different from Narayan. If Anand is the novelist as a reformer, Raja Rao the novelist as a metaphysical poet, Narayan simply is the novelist as a novelist. The location of his novels is the South Indian town Malgudi, as an imaginative version of Narayan’s beloved Mysore. Narayan’s writing is the distinctive blend of western techniques and Eastern materials, and he has succeeded in a remarkable way in making an Indian sensibility at home in English art. Both Anand and Narayan write autobiographical novels in which they abundantly deal with the Hinduism and its importance for their family and society. “My Days” (1974) lacks the implacable inclusiveness of the full-scale autobiography as well as its impassioned self regard. Indeed in many ways it is similar to a Narayan’s novel. The account which Narayan gives of his life in “My Days” is an oblique and as unself – regarding a treatment as anything like an autobiography could possibly be in particular it shows Narayan’s fascination for Hinduism, seen so often in his novels; with intricate association of sincerity and self-deception in human life. How nimbly, how deftly but with what forgiving kindness Narayan unravels this universal riddle of mankind, or the version of it lodged in the brain of seventy year old Indian novelist is in fact worth reading.

If Narayan does not believe in any systematic and critical study of his own work, it is because he as a storyteller is in the tradition of the ‘Bhagabata’ the traditional story of his own essay. He takes the most important puranic characters and incident in his stories and presents them as if Narayan is the spoke person of Hinduism. Narayan himself is a lover of Carnatic music, knows that a Hindu tradition of instantaneous, simultaneous performance and response exits, and may be happy if his work is respond to in a more or less similar manner.

Narayan and Anand do not deal with the Hinduism and its socio-cultural significance as the spiritual leaders. Both the writers write about the Hinduism in their own ways. Anand goes analyzing the

He is not, like Anand, a political committed writer, and problems and superstitions in the Hindu society that rag people. How does Kalinath, the priest in the temple attempts to rape Sohin, an untouchable eighteen years old girl in “Untouchable”. Anand wants to show that Kalinath who is a Brahmin maintains double standards. He does not touch the untouchable but wants to release his constipation by raping an untouchable girl, Sohin. When Sohin shouts, Kalinath blames her accusing she pollutes him and temple. Anand’s analysis of Hinduism is only to describe the problems in it like Raja Rao but Narayan portrays the Hinduism not as a moralist but as an artist. He takes everything in Hinduism just like an artist not more than that. He does not want to message the society through his fictions unlike Raja Rao and Anand but goes on writing novels just as novelist. V.Y Kantak essay, “R.K. Narayan’s fictions: A poser to criticism”, for instance, examines why Narayan’s work “haunt us as only art can”, despite its “meager means scanty resource (and) thinness of tone” (38)

Narayan maintains a balance between the Hinduism or Indian tradition and the western culture in his novels from “swami and friend to The Dark Room”. Starting from Swami and Friend to The Dark Room, Narayan indebts heavily to western modes though he depends on the Hinduism and tradition while selecting his themes and characters. Patrick Swiden, in his essay “ Gods, Demons and others in the Novels of R.K. Narayan”, argues that Narayan is indebted to both western and Indian narrative traditions. However this broadly acceptable arguments turns rather untenable when Swiden claims that the author’s early novels from Swami and Friends to The Dark Room are heavily indebted to western models.

Narayan’s novels directly or indirectly deal with Hinduism and its philosophy in various ways through his characters and ways of life. “The Sweet-Vendor” (1967) presents the ambivalent development of its protagonist, is significant in fusing the comic with serious, and to achieve this Narayan resorts to such familiar themes on

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Hinduism as the father-son relationship, domestic life, Gandhism, the Indian paradox of attachment to wealth and desire for total renunciation. All these ideologies Narayan applies to wave the theme of his novels.

Jagan, the Sweet Vendor, is presented comically as an astute businessman and a Gandhian who is simple and frugal in his habits, the author of “Nature cure and Natural Diet”, a regular recite of the Gita. Narayan shows us the potential of his art of Hinduism to achieve profound when in the end we see Jagan, who has hither to believed in the sweetshop or Mali as his sole salvation, reach a higher level of perception and detachment by recognizing the responsibility of each individual for his own salvation.

Hinduism derives its philosophy from the great and grand epics that have been controlling the vast sub continent from the time immemorial. Indian society is mainly based on the moral philosophy of Hinduism which Narayan has derived from the great epics – the Ramayan, the Mohavarat, Astadas puranas, the Gita and the Bhagabatha. The themes of Narayan’s novels and their main characters are woven around such philosophy of Hinduism.

Narayan’s ever-alert eyes for the Hinduism does not spare even on the folk legend of his locality. His “Gods, Demons and Others” (1964), an earlier work, is not really noted for any interpretation of myth or legend, but neither is it a mere paraphrases of the stories found in the Indian puranas. There is an unmistakable freshness of approach and insight in the presentation of characters. It is interesting to note that Narayan, more than any Indian novelist except Raja Rao, has been inspired to a considerable extent by the puranas, not merely in the ingenious ways as one of the legends is adapted in “The Man-Eater of Malgudi” (1961), but also in the art of storytelling. His essay “The world of story tell” is a curious blend of tradition and modern in thought and art. Narayan’s art of fictionalization is rooted from the Hindu traditions and matures in modernism.

Narayan has taken a lot of characters from the great Hindu mythology. The choice of material by and large suggests writer’s vision, and that Narayan has chosen such characters as Naraada and Ravana in his “Gods, Demons and others”, who reappear in his “The Mohavarat” (1977) and “the Ramayan” (1972) only defines the contours of his comic vision. The characters and situations that lend themselves to comic treatment are the very stuff of Narayan’s art.

Like Narayan, Raja Rao also thematizes the Hindu culture and great traditional legends in his fictions but he does not take this art as Narayan. When Raja Rao deals with legends rendering moral messages through his characters like Javni and Ranna, Narayan uses them for various purposes like comic, tragic and humours etc. Raja Rao’s analysis of Hinduism is religious but Narayan takes it in an artistic way. Narayan analyses how religion and Hinduism have gripped Indians confine-ding them in a very narrow sphere. Raja Rao’s treatment of Hinduism is realistic because he himself believes in the Hinduism unlike Mulk Raj Anand. Lynger terms Raja Rao as a believer in the Hinduism and writes, “----- his heart is effectively tethered to his immutable ancient moorings with the strong invisible strings of his traditional Hindu culture” (386) IWE.

Javni is a typical Hindu woman who believes in selfless work and goes on serving her master Ramu and his family in such a way that she could win the hearts of everyone. Ramu’s heart breaks when he has to leave Javni. She is a widow who lives like a staunch, Hindu widow observing all the rules and regulation of the Hindu rules. Her dress, thought, way of living etc. are confined within the frame work of Hinduism.

Javni symbolizes the silent heroism and selfless sacrifice of Indian womanhood like Akkayya. Javni’s portrayal is like the Tagore’s sketching of the post master’s heroine who is broad and lives with the post master without any personal interest. This love and sacrifice are the essence of Hinduism that has been analyzed in different ways in the different situations of Raja Rao and Narayan’s fictions.

The village Kanthapara is a rustic village harboring the religious or god fearing people who mostly depend on either agriculture or on farming for livelihood but their ways of live is controlled and confronted with the thoughts of the Hinduism. Villagers are simple and god fearing. In the name of religion they can do many things. Narasiga a shepherd manages to influence the entire village by Gandhian ideology of truth and non-violence. The Ashram plays very important role in Kanthapara village rendering a spiritual thought to the people by which the social order is maintained. In Hinduism Ashrams are the sources of imparting spiritual knowledge and religious philosophy of Hinduism.

In Tiruchengode Ashram, the master Rajaji is a real spiritual guru. Raja Rao portrays Rajaji as the emblem of Mahatma Gandhi who is treated as an Avatar to uproot the British Administration from India. But Narayan has portrayed sadhus as the comic character in his fictions like Bankim Chandra. The spiritual gurus are sketched as cheats and pretentious personalities whom common illiterate accept them as gods due to their ignorance and illiteracy. People in India, particularly the Hindu section, bow down while seeing bearded half-necked gerua cta-robed sadhus.
Raja Rao weaves a pattern of relationships between the revered master of a local ashram, the Mahatma in background, and the shepherd boy: “... there was a big, big man called Gandhiji and the master knew him, and had talked to him and master had worked for him. Who was this Gandhiji? Narsa had asked. An old man – a bewitching man, a saint, you know ... He looks beautiful as the morning sun, and he wears only a little loincloth like a pariah” (32). (Kanthapara)

When Raja Rao was writing Kanthapara, India was suffused with the ideology of Gandhiji who was struggling against the British rule in India strengthening and organizing the National Congress. The impact of freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhiji influenced the whole India. Thousands of illiterate young people like the shepherd, Narsiga were deeply influenced by Gandhian ideology and thought. As a result a religious atmosphere was created by Gandhiji to unite the whole India. Raja Rao is a follower of Gandhi so; he weaves his fiction talking Truth and non-violence as the basic mantras that are the essential ingredients of Hinduism.

Together with Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand constitutes one of the pillars of the great trio in Indian English fiction. Apart from his contribution to story writing, art of criticism, his relentless crusade against the social events of Hinduism, exploitation of down trodden and his concern for men, women and children of his country and the world at large have been acclaimed in India and abroad. Born at Peswar and brought up by his traditional mother coming from the peasant family and his father, a Head clerk in Dogra Regiment of the British India Army, Anand came in contact with the rural world of Hinduism and rural peasants, sweepers, daily labourers and rickshaw pullers of the North India and was fairly acquainted with his native Panjabi Hinduism and realism which he has successfully applied as an art in his powerful novels i.e. Untouchable (1935), and Coolie (1936) with Dickensian reality. Mulk Raj Anand’s fictions were not as artistic as Narayan who is a real artist.

Like Narayan, Anand as a child was under the profound influence of his mother who, apart from arranging some money for his higher studies in London against the will of his father, left a long lasting impact on his mind by telling him, as is actually done by all mothers, stories about the myriad facts of India – a fact that has been unabashedly recognized by Anand as a short story writer, not with torturous anxiety, but with nostalgic self-sacrifice, affectionate acknowledgement and candid confession. Significantly it is Indian grandmother and mother who initiates her children into the world folktales, the world of ancient heroes and heroines, kings and queens, feats of heroism and supernaturally surcharged situations with doses of fear, wit, irony and humour - which secure a permanent seat in mind and heart of the children for long and subconsciously and even unconsciously guides them as a solid impetus inspiration in their future course of life. Anand is very much influenced by the Hinduism and its ideologies which he puts forth in his fiction in a secular way.

R.K. Narayan, Anand and Raja Rao are the followers of the tradition emphasizing restoration as well as preservation of classical norms of older discipline and developed the concept of tradition involving a special kind of nostalgic sense – a perception of past and its continuation in the present as well while conceding the vital fact that the past and present in the fictions of the trios are not the isolated segments of time and they are two inseparable facts of some organism “ceaselessly conditioning and reshaping each other”. Eliot points to one of the fundamental aspects of comparative criticism.

Anand’s childhood was the fertile ground for literature like other fiction writers of India as he came in contact with ‘Katha Sarita Sagara’, one of the oldest story books written on Hinduism. He reads rereads and at last falls in love with this story book. Later these stories in this book were the part and parcels of his life as a child. In his “Preface to selected short stories” (1955), Anand acknowledges the influence of the book on him.

“One of the oldest books of stories in India was entitled ocean of stories, I have always thought of this book as a highly finished art of storytelling in India. I read it at an early age was inspired by it to read and hear many of the folktales told in my country. And always I want to write stories as finished in form and as rich content as the stories told among the people. In fact, the folktale form has seemed to me the most perfect form of short story (Amrik Singh, 2008: 67).

Anand is really influenced by the writers like Maxim Gorky and Tolstoy like R.K. Narayan. From Tolstoy’s he derived inspiration for concentration of character and situations of contemporary life, whereas the Indian fables and folktales provides him with the frame work of human beings, even the anecdotes concocted of his teachers, master Sahah Nawaz, based on the life and incident related to the Birbal and Akbar, the Moghul Emperor, enriched his art of humour with which he could expose his follies and foibles in his stories and novels. From Gorky, Anand imbided the art of humanity so as to depict human condition and suffering in poignant manner. Humanity is the basic mantra of Humanism. Anand treats every living being around him on the basis of humanity and sympathy which are the essential qualities of the Hinduism in India. Like Narayan, Anand even accepted the form wit and humour of folktales. The
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The writer unabashedly acknowledges the fact that folktales are benefits of modern sensibility and that is precisely the reason why he looked for inspiration from the individual and group psychology of the European ‘conte’ with the view of establishing what T.S. Eliot would call “Conformity between the old and new”. Anand does not return to the root always unlike Raja Rao and Narayan. He comes closer to Shelley’s notion that poets are benefactors of mankind and they are ‘unacknowledged Legislators of the world’. To him, a writer is fairy voice of the people, who through his own anxiety and agony, realizes the suffering of masses through his reflective mind, transmutes in art all feelings and thoughts and experiences and finally becomes the seer of the new vision. Art is therefore fundamentally related to life, and the artist is a seer who transforms words into prophecy. In his intense involvement with rural ethos right from the very childhood which promoted Anand to choose characters from the lap of Indian society which was reeling under oppressive colonial rule on the one hand, and various socio-political religious evils of the Hindu society such as casteism, untouchability, class distinction, orthodox beliefs and inequality on the other.

His characters are not the product of ivory towers; they are rather known people artistically produced, now as his mouth piece conveying the author’s moods and preoccupation with contemporary problems, and the next movement as products of his creative Labour and vision epitomizing a new Hindu world born out of protest against oppression, exploitation and injustice. Here Anand has gone beyond the anxiety of influence, and the contests the traditional hegemonic Hindu religious orthodoxy of which his mother is representative. He also revolted against the mother’s orthodox method of worship, and took the position of an Existentialist by calling God a patriarch.

Anand is subjective writer like Raja Rao. Narayan was very much objective while functionalizing the Hindu aspects and characters. Anand downplays Ronald Breath’s notion that is “Author is dead”. Though a seasoned realist his confessional art and the Hinduistic rigor often interrogates T.S.Eliot’s theory of impersonality that calls for continual self sacrifice and escape from personality. Even though he has four rounds of discussion with T.S. Eliot, Anand seems to be less interested in Eliot’s art of literary criticism.

The trio-R.K Narayan, Ananda and Raja Rao have given a shape to English literature in India. Though there is much dissimilarity among these three writers, they basically portray Indian society and its enriched cultures in their writings.

References: