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Thematic and Stylistic Aspects in R.K. Narayana's Novels: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan was rejected in his early career, but today he is recognized internationally. He represents the typical Indian way of life in his novels. He is different than his contemporaries Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao in the sense of avoiding serious mood. All his works are the mixture of irony and humour, realism and fantasy. Narayan does not present deeper and darker aspects of life. He writes about the human emotions through direct and simple narrative. He adopted the Western form and style but made it unique with his own ideas and experience. Through the depiction of his imaginary Malgudi town, he shows the traditions of old and new India. This paper aims to explore the thematic and stylistic aspects of Narayana's novels in general. The researcher has explored his themes and techniques to judge his skills as a novelist.

Key Words: Theme, style, characterization, form, critical analysis

Introduction:

R.K. Narayan is a 20th century Indian English writer. He is one of the prominent writers among his contemporaries Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. They are together known as "Triumvirate" of Indian Writing in English. R.K. Narayan has created a fictional South Indian town named "Malgudi". Most of his novels and stories are set in Malgudi. He is also known to children as many of his stories are prescribed in school and college curriculum today. He has got a permanent place in the mind of his readers with his wide range of subjects and knowledge of humanity.

Themes and Techniques in R.K. Narayan's Novels:

The main theme of his novels is the place of man in the universe. He covers all the aspects of human life from birth to death. He records life as he observes. He is neither purely tragic nor comic, but his novels are the mixture of the two. He represents the theme of real values of life and traditional Indian culture.



VIDHYAYANA

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The English Teacher deals with the search of identity. Krishna is depressed due to his wife's early death but later he realizes that she exists in a more refined state that is spiritual existence. *The Guide* deals with the theory of karma. In the beginning of the novel, Raju was a tourist guide and had illegitimate relation with a married woman, but at the end of the novel he devotes his life for the welfare of the society. He becomes successful in search of truth.

Many of his novels are based on religious scriptures such as Mahabharata and Bhagvad Gita. Margayya in *The Financial Expert* believed that money is everything, believed in materialism. He thought that real happiness lies in physical comfort. Finally, that happiness turns out to be an illusion. *The Guide* is another novel based on this theme. Raju did not know his moral duty and thus he was able to lead himself on the right path. After his awakening, he turns to be a "Spiritual Guide" from the tourist guide.

Through Jagan who is the main character of the novel *Vendor of Sweets* Narayan represents the Hindu values of life. In this novel, Narayan proves that it is necessary to observe one's weaknesses to discover the Truth. Narayan's technique is enriched with the world myths of Bhasmasura, Kubera and Midas etc. So, his novels become more powerful and the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity becomes evidenced.

The centre of Narayan's fiction is family through which he represents the values of life and this world. In his novels we see that family relations are treated by him with a profound understanding of the Indian social ethos - viz., that of son and parents, and brother and brother in the *Bachelor of Arts*, of husband and wife and father and daughter in *The English Teacher*, of father and son in *The Financial Expert*, and of grandmother and grandson in *Waiting for Mahatma*. The traditional Indian family is the central part of the Indian social structure. R.K. Narayan presents these norms with an insider's understanding. Margayya is a money maniac, but he is still an anxious father who cannot bear the sight of his son's debauchery. In the



VIDHYAYANA

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moment of righteous fury, he overcomes his fear of Dr. Pal, the instrument of sin. Marco in *The Guide* has no interest in anything living or breathing, but as Rosie's husband, he is still not dead enough to his duties as husband and to the moral code which attaches itself to a marital relationship. When he comes to know of his wife's disloyalty, he disowns her. In spite of being a deserted wife, according to Indian cultural view Rosie is more a sinner than sinned against. She is unpardonable in the eyes of Raju's mother who believes in traditional values. So, she cannot bear to accommodate a spoiled woman.

From the above discussion, it can be said that R.K. Narayan is a prolific writer. He covers the varied themes. He was also influenced by the Gandhian ideology. His themes include spirituality, ideals of life, family relationship, the search of identity etc.

Form and Style:

Narayan adopted his form and style from the West but his ideas and thoughts are his own. A blending of East and West can be found in his novels. R.K. Narayan expresses his views through the depiction of the images of India. He combines old and new traditions through the landscape and ethos of Malgudi. In Malgudi lies his greatest strength.

He uses simple and pure English avoiding the complicated adjectives and metaphors. So, his tone is natural and easy to understand. He uses the English language but represents the feelings, thoughts and ideas of India, especially South India. William Walsh writes, "The Mysore of his personal life, the Malgudi of his novelist's life, becomes an intense and brilliant image of India itself. What happens in India happens in Malgudi and whatever happens in Malgudi happens everywhere" (8)

Narayan's view of life and world of values are basically native and essentially Indian. R.K. Narayan had the capability to keep his vision of life strong over a long period of time. Such a long-term sustainability is not possible for every writer. Projecting Malgudi as an imaginary South Indian town Narayan represented



VIDHYAYANA

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his fictional feelings, ideas and thoughts. Thus, he successfully focused his worldview through Malgudi.

Narayan uses English language perfectly in harmony with his theme and technique. He uses English perfectly to convey his message. In *Guide* R. K. Narayan experiments with a new technique of telling a story. He uses both current narrative and flashback technique in juxtaposition by alternatively describing the incidents of the present life of Raju as they actually take place and the incidents of his early life as they are being related by him to Velan. This method provokes the curiosity of the reader. R.K. Narayan has a rare psychological insight into the human mind and character. The portraits are many and varied: the picture of a woman who shows extra interest in her husband after committing adultery, the mind of an aggrieved lover who has no interest in life being separated from his beloved, and a lover who takes extra care of his clothes when appearing before his beloved. These are very natural descriptions. The vignettes are many and all are artistic and realistic. R.K. Narayan describes pathetic scenes with a restraint of manner and skill. The scene when Raju's mother leaves her son due to his wrong doings is very moving.

Narayan often shifted his subject matter from actual to pure fantasy. In this also he was quite different from the other contemporary novelists. Narayan's art of dealing with reality or fantasy is quite different from that of the other novelists. In *The Financial Expert* Narayan describes Margayya's quest for materialistic happiness and his attachments by mixing reality with fantasy. In *The English Teacher* "the unrelatedness of much of the detail that Narayan works into the particular Indian milieu" it appears quite ridden with unrealistic features. But when the novel ends there can be seen a note of fulfilment and a serenity. Krishna starts with the case that this death is not an end. It is possible to re-establish contact with what had been lost. It is not a subject of worry on grounds of rational thoughts. It is a perfect definition of yogic self-control. So, at the end of the novel Krishna is very much different as he was at the beginning.



VIDHYAYANA

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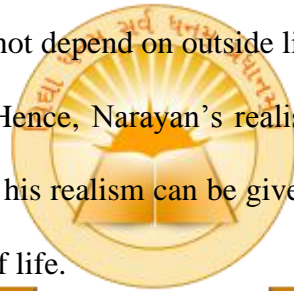
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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Critical Insights:

R.K. Narayan believes in objectivity which is difficult to maintain. He has a good command over objectivity. One cannot find subjectivity in his novels. He does not preach anything through his works. He even does not try to convince something to his readers. He leaves it on the readers to decide. This is the greatest ability of R.K. Narayan.

R.K. Narayan is a realist and he presents the contemporary society realistically. In fact, his strength lies in realism and not in romance. He is aware of the great value of realism. He presents the society very accurately with all the minute details. He describes the life of a tourist guide through Raju, the protagonist of novel *The Guide*. In *Mr. Sampath*, he gives the complete details of the film production. If he has to describe the life of a professor of English, he does not depend on outside life of a class room but goes beyond it to the discussion of subject in the class room. Hence, Narayan's realism is not only accurate and vivid but also very convincing. Many more examples of his realism can be given from his novels. This is the way how his realistic narrative presents various slices of life.



VIDHYAYANA

R.K. Narayan is not a didactic novelist; He has an extraordinary power of evoking a sense of life. He is not a critic of society but certainly a critic of conduct. He is also one of the very few professional Indian writers as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar tells us, "It is not easy to make a living in India as a man of letters."² To become a successful novelist Narayan tried to limit his fictional activity to the narrow boundaries of a region. He chose little circumference of place to become his fictional world. His novels offer presentation of the life of South Indian manners, mental activities, social matters, customs and traditions and the geographical features. Narayan's success as a novelist chiefly consists in his selectivity of a particular locale for the fictional activity.

Narayan's writings style has often been compared to that of William Faulkner. Since both their



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works brought out the humour and energy of ordinary life while deploying compassionate humanism. The similarities also extended to their juxtaposing in the demands of society against the confusions of individuality. Although their approach to subject was similar, their methods were different. Faulkner was rhetorical and illustrate his points with immense prose while Narayan was very simple and realistic, capturing the elements all the same. In this regard M.K. Naik sums up most significantly what R.K. Narayan has come to mean for literature in English in the world:

R.K. Narayan's chief contribution to Indian English fiction is two-fold : first, he has created a tiny but perfectly credible universe in Malgudi, which is in the same class as Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha ; and he has filled it with men and women who are as real to us as the people actually around us. Secondly, an eagle-eyed observer of life and human nature, he has illuminated the basic ironies' deep-seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of the human condition. (173)

Like Wordsworth's Lake District, Hardy's Wessex, and Arnold Bennet's Pottery Towns, the locale of Narayan's Novels is Malgudi and its surroundings figures in ten novels and hundreds of short stories. The habits and manners, the daily routine and business, activities and professions, and ways of living of the people of Malgudi are portrayed by Narayan in his novels, the novelist presents a picture of Malgudi that has gone on growing and increasing from the early 'thirties to the seventies. The people of this town grow out of it, live in it, and belong to it. If one wants to understand the tender humanity of India, as the reviewer of the English Teacher, Margaret Parton has said, one should read one of Narayan's novels.

R.K. Narayan is a novelist of common people and common situation. His plots are built of material and incidents that are neither extraordinary nor heroic. The tone of his novels is quiet and subdued. He selects day-to-day incidents that happen to almost every one of us. His heroes are average human beings and



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they do not possess extraordinary capacities, but through some incidents attain greatness very soon to return to their original state. If we take the life of a school boy like Swami, we find nothing extraordinary or strange in his life. Similarly, Mr. Sampath, Chandran, Raju, Savitri, Ramani and others live, love and suffer in maze of incidents which are just commonplace.

Conclusion:

The researcher has concluded that Narayan is neither a social nor a religious reformer but he is a novelist of realism. He portrays the society as it is. He can be compared to Shakespeare in his vision of world and humanity. His greatest charm lies in his style and form. He also used Indianized language that make him unique among others. He believes in "art for art's sake". His novels are great examples of humour and irony. The novels of Narayan are significant for his themes and styles which are very much Indianized.



VIDHYAYANA



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VIDHYAYANA