R.K. Narayan has a very strong background firmly fixed on the Vedic injunction. Narayan never fails to extol the Vedic perspectives in his novels. How he impregnates the essential concepts of Vedic philosophy into the sequence of events in his novels are indeed worth admiring. In the most expected places Narayan inserts the profound philosophy which provides the reader with a sudden insight into the concept of ‘WHO AM I’.

The question ‘Who am I’ is the basic principle on which the entire Vedas is built. One who is a ‘jnani’ or scholar, in whose mind this question arises, is considered eligible to pursue the study of Vedic literature which includes the four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharvana), 108 Upanishads, 18 Puranas, the Itihases and Brahmasutra. In ‘Brahmasutra’ the philosophical treatise on the Upanishad, the first verse says, ‘atato brahma jijnasa’

which means an inquiry into the knowledge about the self, which again is “who am I’. The answer to this profound question is the prime subject of the entire Vedas as already mentioned. One who has cherished this question in his mind is rightly motivated to pursue the ultimate reality of life—becoming aware of the self.

This profound question is being repeated on many occasions in the novels of Narayan. Srinivas is one of the main characters in the novel Mr. Sampath. Narayan portrays Srinivas as quite philosophical. After his graduation he spends years reading the Upanishads and not in the least bothered about earning a livelihood. The mystic purity of the Upanishads, which in terms of human existence means restrained and regulated life becomes Srinivas’ dominant passion in life.

When Srinivas approached the old landlord for a house, the old landlord asked him, “Who are you?”

“It is a profound question.”[replies Srinivas]. “What mortal can answer it?”(Sampath 9). While he thundered against municipal or social short coming a voice went on asking, “Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?”(30)

This statement is the natural conclusion for his questioning mind and he has to find an answer for question.
His interest in the Upanishads leads him to ask, “Is it right to be family centered”. He says that every activity in this world is centered on false ego [I am this body-(i.e) My] and real ego [I am a soul--(i.e) I]. While he was reading Upanishad he was totally absorbed in it. All his domestic worries and all these questions of prestige seem ridiculously petty.

“My children, my family, my responsibility must guard my prestige and do my duties to my family-who am I?”(13)

Srinivas considers this to be far more serious a problem he has to face. These are meant to encourage gradual development of self realization.

The Vedic wisdom advises how to live and get rid of the material entanglement. The chance for spiritual realization is offered in the form of the Upanishads, which are the part of different Vedas. Thus reading few lines from Upanishads, Srinivas involves himself in deep inquiries above his own self which is the beginning of self realization.

“Till I know ‘who I am’ how can I know what I should do?”(13). Narayan is at his best when he deals with it for he has got a very strong foundation of Vedic literature. The same idea is very much echoed in Narayan’s A Tiger for Malgudi, which is considered to be a very profound work by almost all the critics. This novel is about a tiger possessed of the soul of an enlightened human being who tells the readers the story of his life.

For example the master who is the chief protagonist is questioned by someone among the crowd.

“Who are you?”

The master replies- “you are asking a profound question. I’ve no idea who am I! All my life I have been trying to find the answer. Are you sure you know who you are?”(Tiger118)

Being steeped in the Vedic philosophical attitude to life, in the acceptance of self realization, Narayan reflects his own response to the deeper needs of life. Thus he is in search of real identity “Who am I”.

The inquiry of Vedanta Sutra “Who am I”-I am a spirit soul.

This can be understood very easily from Srila Prabhupada’s teachings found in the Topmost Yoga System ‘I am’ not this body, because at the time of death the body remains-although everyone cries, “Oh the poor man is gone!” the man is lying there. Why do you say he is gone? He is lying there! At that time we can come to our senses, the body is not the man. The real man is gone—that is the soul (9).

When one understands that he is not his body and is a spirit soul, he comes to his real ego. In the Vedic literature [Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10] it is said, “aham brahmasmi”, (I am a spirit soul). The quality of a spirit soul is explained in Bhagavad Gita as follows.

avinasī tu tad viddhi
yena sarvam idam tatam
vinasam avyayasya yasya
na kascit kartum arhati.

(That which provides the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul.) (96)
This verse more clearly explains the real nature of the soul, which is spread all over the body. Anyone can understand what is spread all over the body. It is consciousness. This consciousness is the symptom of the soul.

In Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna says soul is the maintainer of the body.

antavanta ime deha
nityas yoktah saririnah
anasino ’prameyasya ...

(The material body of the indestructible, immeasurable and eternal living entity is sure to come to an end.) (98-99).

The material body is perishable by nature. It may perish immediately or it may do so after a hundred years. It is a question of time only. There is no chance of maintaining it indefinitely. But the spirit soul is so minute that it cannot even be seen by anybody. In the Vedanta Sutras the living entity is qualified as light because he is part and parcel of the Supreme light. As sunlight maintains the entire universe, so the light of the soul maintains this material body. As soon as the spirit soul is out of this material body the body begins to decompose: therefore it is the spirit soul which maintains this body.

The same idea retreated in The English Teacher. The novel is undoubtedly the most personal and autobiographical of Narayan’s novels. It is a direct result of the agony of Krishna’s losing his wife, whom he loved very clearly. The novel is indeed based on the need to understand and realize life and death which are two different states of existence where two entirely different systems of values exist. There is certainly a deliberate contrast in the novel between the visible bodily world of human being and the invisible world of spirit and dead.

He establishes the universal truth that the fulfillment of man’s desires and aspirations is limited very much by forces outside the control of the human will. There are certain facts of which death is the most obvious which no aspiration and no force of man can conquer. There is a sort of stubbornness in the stuff of experience which frustrates and resists the human desire. This idea of fatalism as well as helplessness gets more affirmed when the doctor says – “What can we do? We have done our best” (Teacher 94).

Narayan here drives home the point that the human body is perishable, whereas the soul is eternal. Narayan establishes this fact while talking about how Krishna succeeds in communicating with the spirit of his wife. Here the readers of Narayan get the answer to the question which his characters like Srinivas and the Master ask the question ‘Who am I’. Narayan had a definite idea about human problems like birth, death, old age and disease which cannot be conquered by any living entity.

While talking about the loneliness and separation, which is caused by the sudden death of his wife, Narayan, the master craftsman, puts the same idea that the soul – the maintainer of the body which is not perishable by nature. He says there in no escape from loneliness and separations.

“Wife, child, brothers, parents, friends ... we come together only to go apart again. It is one continuous movement. They move away from us as we move away from them. The law of life can’t be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother’s womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or to get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. The fact must be
recognized. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. All else is false” (177).

One can come across the same idea repeated in A Tiger for Malgudi which may be considered to be the masterpiece of Narayan.

“No relationship human or other association of any kind could last forever. Separation is the law of life right from the Mother’s womb.” (Tiger 174)

Bhagavat Gita confirms this idea:

\[
\text{na jayate mriyate va kadacin} \\
\text{nayam bhutva bhavita va bhuyah} \\
\text{ajo nitya sasvato yam purano} \\
\text{na hanyate hanyamane sarire}
\]

(For the soul there is neither birth nor death at anytime. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever – existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.) (101-102)

For example in The English Teacher Susila, who is no more, tries to send a message to her husband through a medium. This proves that her physical body is destroyed but not the soul.

“This is a message for Krishna from his wife Susila who recently passed over .... She has been seeking all these months some means of expressing herself to her husband, but the opportunity has occurred only today, when she found the present gentleman a very suitable medium of expression. Through him she is happy in another region, and wants him also to eradicate the grief in his mind. We are nearer to each other than you understand. And I am always watching him and the child ...” (Teacher 106)

It is quite distinctly stated in all Vedic literatures and especially in Bhagavad-Gita that death is not an end:

\[
\text{jatasya hi druvo mrturyu} \\
\text{dhruvam janna mrtasya ca} \\
\text{tasmad aparihaye rthe} \\
\text{na tvam socitum arhasi}
\]

(One who has taken his birth is sure to die, and after death one is sure to take birth again. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament). (110-111)

This piece of thought is very clearly substantiated in the The English Teacher as well as in A Tiger for Malgudi. We find Krishna lamenting over the sudden demise of his wife. At that time Krishna was not aware of the fact that death is not an end of life. Krishna comes to know about this reality when his wife communicates with him and enlightens him about the fact that the soul is eternal.

Krishna tries to gather more information about the life after death. He confirms from Susila’s spirit that the soul never perishes. Though Susila is physically no more Krishna experiences her presence by his side on the bed and converse with her and when she leaves him in the early morning he utters the following words, “We stood at the window, gazing on a slender, red streak over the eastern rim of the earth. A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy – a moment for which one feels grateful to life and death” (Teacher 184)
While acknowledging the fact that any artist is bound to improve in his art as he gains experience, the researcher is inclined to conclude that the realization about the law of life Narayan gained out of loneliness caused by the separation of his wife played a greater role in bringing about a great change in his philosophy of life and his ability in creative writing. Indeed this realization has not only touched the recesses of his mind and soul, but also ignited a sort of enlightenment in Narayan which can be confirmed from the fact that the novels which follow The English Teacher show a maturity of mind, art and tightness in structure. The analysis of the novels like Mr. Sampath, The Man Eater of Malgudi and A Tiger for Malgudi may hold testimony to this view. This realization would have helped Narayan to create characters like Sampath and Srinivas in his novel Mr. Sampath which follows immediately after the The English Teacher. One finds Sampth being very materialistic right from the beginning of the novel. But Srinivias view everything in larger contest of time which is cyclical.

In Mr. Sampath, the quest for self realization is the main theme. When one analyses the characters like Sampath and Srinivas in Mr. Sampath one may be tempted to believe that Narayan would have had the same line of thought in his mind. Sampath is completely materialistic and he always runs after sense gratification. He does not find time to pose and think for a moment anything about self-realization. Perhaps that may be the reason why Shiva. K. gilra says, “Sampath and Margaya uproot themselves from their traditional ethos to run after illusions of material success”. (40)

One may find from the beginning how Srinivas is dripping away even from his family life and going towards the quest for self-realization. This can be understood easily from the conversation between himself and his elder brother.

His brother asked, “What exactly is it that you wish to do in life?” Srinivas flushed for a moment, but regained his composure and answered: “Don’t you see? There are ten principle Upanishads. I would like to complete the series. This is the third.”(Sampath12)

Through Narayan depicts Srinivas as a totally different character from the other characters in the novel, he faces the same kind of mutual crisis just like any other man who is caught between worldly duties and the quest for self realization.

He asked himself, “Family duties come before any other duty. Is it an absolute law? What if I don’t accept the position? I am sure, if I stick to my deeper conviction; other things like this will adjust themselves.” (33)

Though Srinivas is the script write for the film ‘Burning of Kama’ about the success of which everyone is very speculative, one may find Srinivas being very much balanced by understanding the meaninglessness behind the mad rush for worldly things. Perhaps that may be the reason why he is not at all disturbed when the attempt for the film making got completely wrecked all on a sudden.

After a long silence of seven years of the publication of The Painter of Signs in 1976 one can hardly disagree with the verdict that Narayan is at the peak of his creative originality in A Tiger for Malgudi. Like all fables, A Tiger for Malgudi tells a good story. As the story proceeds one is made aware of much more clarity in design and intersection in the narrative momentum. In an unusual prefactory introduction, Narayan reveals how he came to write this novel. He had read newspaper report of a tiger faithfully hermit during the Kumbhamela festival and speculated on its possibilities for a novel. He writes,” It also occurred to me that
with a few exceptions here and there, humans have monopolized the attention of fiction writers."(Tiger 7)

He then emphasizes the moral basis of this novel. “Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures…..I made a tiger the central characters in a novel”(7-8).Like Narayan’s other central characters, the tiger too, experiences fear at first but eventually triumphs over it. The tables are turned and the population melts out of sight as the tiger roams the street of Malgudi. Raju witnessed the cowardice of mankind. Their sense of insecurity and the irrational dread of losing their assets lie behind this behavior. The tiger takes refuge in the headmaster’s room of a local school and the door is bolted on the outside with the unfortunate head master trapped in the attic. The tiger’s redeemer arrives none other than the master who admonishes the crowd for using words such as ‘beast’ and ‘brute’ for the tiger.

“They are ugly words coined by man in his arrogance.”(118)

When their attempt to shoot the tiger fails, again due to the psychic aggressive powers of the master, he succeeds in subduing the tiger and walks away with the animal at the heels.

The religious aspect takes over from the moral and the social on the next stage of the tiger’s life is one of the gradual transformations, equivalent to the Hindu ashrama of sanyasa. It is here that Narayan perfects the theme of renunciation and creates a real sanyasi in the Master, instead of the earlier fake Sadhu Raju, the guide. The master is neither animal trainer, nor is he an ordinary man. Once a respectable and prosperous man of the world, a man of property, and one who had taken an active part in the politics he gives up everything. Like Siddhartha he renounces the world because of an “inner compulsion,” in order to merge his could with the universal soul and attain the spiritual insight of a mystic. (38)

The tiger, ferocious in nature is calmed by the power of the Master’s suggestion alone. He stands head and shoulders above humanity in general and is a symbol of the perfection that man can reach through the pursuit of ancient wisdom.

“Life or death is in no one’s hands: you cant die by willing or escape death by determination. A great power has determined the number of breaths for each individual, who can neither stop them not prolong ... that’s why God says in the Gita “I am life death: I am the killer and the killed...” (142)

The first lesson the tiger learns is that it is not a tiger. It must learn to transcend the self – a lesson that does not come easily to man. As old age advance, Raja learns to appreciate the companionship of the forest animals. Self realization can only come through acceptance rather the rejection.

In spite of the fact that the world around Narayan changed at a fast phase, his novels maintained the slow phase, which he had developed since the 1930. Narayan is deeply rooted in tradition and religion. In his novels the conflict between tradition and modernity is very common, but in the long run, he holds to the deep rooted tradition.

Though he maintains objective detachment from his themes and characters, a close scrutiny reveals his Indianess: and even detachment is an essentially Indian quality. This is reflected in the character of Srinivas in Mr. Sampath. It appears that Narayan believes that society is not man-made by choice; it is a part of the universal order. Therefore if one wants to appreciate his work, one must understand his view of man’s life relation to the cyclical universal order and his attachment to the wheel of existence, which is purely Indian.
According to the Hindu philosophy in which Narayan’s faith is unshakeable as evident in his novels, this mundane world is not the real world and so is ultimately insignificant. Being essentially Hindu in his attitude, custom and practice, Narayan views every phenomenon as illusion (maya). Through characterization Narayan filters the unique Hindu philosophy. The lives of his major characters revolve a particular obsession which may be ambition as in Srinivas of Mr. Sampath, A Tiger for Malgudi, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, the main characters prove to be truly Indian in spirit as they strive for their true identity. Srinivas in Mr. Sampath is a classic example. As he experiences Ravi being exorcised, he experiences the necessity on a person’s part to achieve true identity. This realization frees him from the shackles of involvement in the mundane world.

As R.K. Narayan acquired the universal truth from the Vedas that the soul is eternal, he developed the character of Krishna in The English Teacher and made him realize at the end that death is not an end. The realization is that only the body of his wife Susila perished and he could communicate with the spirit soul which is eternal.

The same idea is reinforced in A Tiger for Malgudi. According to Narayan the tiger and the Sannyasi were brothers in the previous life, which amounts to prove that the soul is eternal and only the body is changed.

CONCLUSION

Narayan proves to be very victorious in characterization by portraying characters like Srinivas, Master, Tiger and Natraj who are the product of the true Vedic spirit. The novels The English Teacher, A tiger for Malgudi, The Man-Eater of Malgudi and Mr. Sampath become all the more popular among the Indian readers for this philosophy of life which is a part of the mass consciousness of the Indian people.
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