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R.K.Narayan: The Grand Old Man of Indian Fiction**Showkat Hussain Dar**

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This is an axiomatic fact that the Indian fiction in English is the most popular of all forms and has gone 'transnational' with Indian diasporic living in the West and writing beyond nationality. *The Big Three* phrase coined by William Walsh comprises of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, have helped to lift this form to International status and recognition. The influence of their importance in the world of the Indian English novel cannot be measured. With Anand's *Untouchable*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Rao's *Kanthapura*, the Indian English novel found its place in the gummut of Indian Literature.

R. K. Narayan is one of the leading figures in Indo-Anglian fiction. He is a pure artist. He is the only major writer in Indo-Anglian fiction who is free from didacticism. He is neither a spiritualist nor a social reformer nor a pure writer of comedies. He is an observer of life as it appears to him. His works are neither purely tragic nor purely comic. It is the mixture of the two. He believes in domestic harmony and peaceful relations.

R. K. Narayan is the creator of regional novel in Indian English Literature. The imaginative region of *Malgudi* is the domain of Narayan's imagination. Wordsworth immortalized *The District Lake* in his poetry, and Hardy's *Wessex* is a district more real than the present district of England. In the same way, Narayan's *Malgudi* is a reality charged with all that is intimate and poignant in human nature. His characters are the true children of *Malgudi*. His characters reveal a definite journey of the self from innocence to experience and eventually to wisdom. His characters and plots are inseparably knit together. His works reveal his comic vision of life through irony and paradox. Narayan's command over language is remarkable and he used it as the medium of story-telling in a simple, lucid and unaffected manner.

The Indian English fiction took the later start, yet it has gone far ahead of poetry both in quantity and quality. It was only with the Gandhian struggle that Indo-English novel really came to its own. With the publication of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's, *Kanthapura*, and R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* that the novel in English may be said to have come of age. These three novelists have considerably enriched Indo-Anglian fiction. They are also known as the "founding fathers" of Indian-English fiction for whom the art were as important as the communication it sought to convey.

R. K. Narayan is widely regarded as India's greatest writer in English of the 20th century. He was a pure artist whose sole aim was to give aesthetic satisfaction. Graham Greene the renowned English novelist with whom Narayan enjoyed a life-long literary friendship appreciates the Narayan's art as "underlying sense of beauty and sadness" of his work is parallel with Chekhov. Greene further writes about his friend, “

Narayan wakes in me a spring of gratitude...without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian".

Alfred Kazin estimates Narayan and his art in one of his reviews as,

“Mr. Narayan is an almost placid, good natured story teller whose work derives its charm from the immense calm out of which he writes. Mr. Narayan's strength is that his material

seems inexhaustible. But there are levels of irony, subtle inflexions and modulations in his easy, transparent style."

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan popularly known as R. K. Narayan was born in 1906 in Madras. It is bit surprising that one of the most successful Indo-Anglian writers wasn't a good student. He failed both in High School and inter-mediate examinations and could get his degree only when he was twenty-four years old. As a result of these failures his personality was adversely affected and he became somewhat an introvert. These failures at school and college made him shy, reserved and diffident. He even tried to commit suicide once.

In order to supplement the meager income of the family, he worked as clerk and then took up the job of a teacher in a village school. But he was not satisfied with these professions and gave them up in desperation and decided to devote all his time for writing. He did not then expect to make money out of his writings but a mean for self expression. This all stands to reason in his first work. His first work was the review of a book titled *Development of Maritime laws of 17th-Century England*. He is rather cynical about it and writes,

"A most unattractive book, but I struggled through its pages and wrote a brief note on it, and though not paid for it, it afforded me the thrill of seeing my words in print for the first time."

In those days it was unthinkable that an Indian could become a successful writer in English. Even his father did not like the idea of becoming a writer, considering the uncertainty involved in it. But Narayan was determined to become a writer and eventually proved how correct his decision was when he achieved tremendous success as a novelist and as a short-story writer.

R. K. Narayan wrote in English but attained popularity not only in India but in Europe for his sensitive observation of human nature. Most of his stories deal with Indian life and are written in a style which is both simple and lucid. Though he has written complete novels Like *The Bachelor of Arts*, *Mr. Sampath*, *Swami and Friends*, *Waiting for Mahatma*, *Financial Expert* but his magnum opus work is *The Guide*, for which he gained universal approbation. The novel became so popular that it was translated into number of languages in the world and even a film was made on it. Narayan's genius was duly recognized when he was awarded Sahitya Academy Award for *The Guide* in 1960. But the writer is known for his short-stories and this has given him a permanent place in modern Indian English Literature. He has written more than one hundred and fifty short-stories. Some of them are *Golden Belt*, *A Career*, *Man Hunt*, *End of troubles*, *The Snake Dogs*, and *A Hica*. They were published in magazines and newspapers.

The stories of R. K. Narayan are chiefly plot stories. Not so much emphasis was laid upon incidents and characterization but in depicting the happening of day in day out life. His stories are ordinary occurrences yet they are profound in their affect. He only recreates the atmosphere in simple language and collecting details and thereby creating a lively tale of human experience.

R. K. Narayan was a conscious story-writer. He pursues his art with seriousness and dedication. His task was the faithful presentation of life which was purely Indian. His stories are free from artificiality and superfluous details. He appears to write with a set formula, working out on the details painstakingly, however, that does not undermine the naturalness of his narrative. It was able to depict something which was purely Indian.

Narayan didn't follow the European style of story writing but bears affinities with American short-story writer O Henry. His stories have a tail and aim at surprising ending. He is a skillful narrator of factual and human scenes. His narration is direct, simple and pointed.

Narayan is regarded as a pure artist, especially, when compared with his contemporaries like Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. His is 'art for art's sake'. He didn't write to propagate his ideas on social or political issues though when he started his literary career India was passing through the crucial period of her struggle for independence.

Narayan experienced a jolt when Rajam, his sweet heart, died of typhoid, only five years after their marriage. Her death was a shattering for the young writer. It was probably this tragic incident which gave maturity and depth to his character. This made him understand the harsh realities of life. Knowledge comes through intense suffering and Narayan must have gained knowledge by his personal suffering. His grief and suffering find expression in many of his works.

Narayan is one of the Indian greatest English writers of the last century. It was the television adaptation of his stories, his fictional town, *Malgudi*, that has left a permanent mark on psyche of Indian fiction readers. He takes us to *Malgudi* laugh, sympathise and share the vicissitudes of its inhabitants. *Malgudi* is as remarkable a place in literature as *The Wessex* of Hardy, *Boarder countries* of Scott or *The Lake District* of Wordsworth.

R K Narayan started his career as a novelist dealing primarily with the atmosphere of schools and colleges. Therefore, in all of his early novels there are mostly school boys, teachers, college boys and college teachers. His early novels include *Sawami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room*, and *The English Teacher*. The novels present a sociological study of the pre-independence era. The middle novels of Narayan except 'Waiting for the Mahatma' (depicts socio-political conditions of post 1947), are the delightful stories of three cunning sharks whose greatest fault was their over-confidence. In the middle novels we have *Mr. Sampath*, *Financial Expert* and *The Guide*. The later novels are based on the classical myths-the inevitable victory of the good over the evil, the law of life and concept of karama, the concept of cyclical existence and the four stages of human life. The later novels *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, *The Painter of Signs* and *A Tiger for Malgudi* embody the religious and cultural glory of Hindu society. The novels are marked with maturity in fictional imagination.

Narayan is a writer who has his limitations too. He presents a wide range of characters in his novels and short-stories. There are no "good" or "bad" characters in his works. The widespread and universal appeal of Narayan is due to the predominant middle class milieu in all his novels. Unlike Anand and Rao, he is not interested in politics. He is content like Jane Austen with his little bit ivory. But within his limitations Narayan is an exquisite master of the art of story-telling. We like him for his excellent plots, captivating characterization, lyrical language, sharp irony, wit and humour technique in unfolding the mysteries of human nature in his novels and short stories. His novels mirror microcosmic India caught in the conventions, traditions and social changes. His characters are lively presentations of common Indians. His heroines are replicas of common Indian women. Despite a pure Indian living absorbed in religion and family, he achieved a feat to express his creative urge in an alien language and has become virtually craze in European countries.

R. K. Narayan is not only a great novelist, but also a contented and simple man. The remarkable simplicity in his personal life, as experienced by K.Natwar Singh, is noteworthy to be mentioned here:

"I walked up the steps and met by a small man in a shirt and lungi-no shoes. Excuse me, but can you tell me if Mr. R K Narayan lives here? yes, he does, replies the barefooted man I asked if could see him. You are doing so right now—Iam R. K. Narayan".

R. K. Narayan won numerous covetous awards for his tremendous contribution to Indian English Literature. Besides Sahitya Academy Award for the novel *The Guide*, he was able to receive the Film Fare Award. In 1964, he was awarded the Padma Bushan and in 1980 he got AC Benson Medal by the British Royal Society. It is notable that he was a member of Royal Society of Literature (British). In 1970, he received the honorary doctorates from the University of Leeds. In 1982, he was elected an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It is very remarkable that he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature for many times but unfortunately he never received the honor. In 2002, he was given India's second-highest civilian award, the Padma Vibushan. This genius writer died at the age of 94 on 13 May in 2001 after getting the lofty height of success.

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