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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEMES & THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE IN SOME SELECT WORKS OF RK NARAYANAN

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Abstract

A number of RK Narayan studies have traced humor, hilarity, irony, romantic comedy, ideas, facts and philosophies in his works. The present paper undertakes to examine, “A critical analysis of themes & the social relevance in some select works of RK Narayanan”.

The present study reveals that Narayan exposes the practical life of an average Indian inspired by selfishness, local interest, material advancement and the individual life by a supine passivity and lack of commitment. Narayan’s narrative leaves a hard picture of the urgency of the situation through a series of negative instances to promote right attitudes among his countrymen. This is where Narayan’s narratives become relevant. Establishing the topic “A critical analysis of themes & the social relevance in some select works of RK Narayan” has a lot of challenging aspects and the topic becomes even more critical since his works are vast and the depth is immense. The present study attempts to analyze his themes and its social relevance.

Based on this purpose, I have selected five works of RK Narayan. In this research I have examined the themes objectively and narrate uniquely what others have not said. This is required an extensive study of all the criticisms, both appreciative and unmindful. I am optimistic that the research findings will have several implications for literature instructors and students since more focus will be on the social relevance of this great and wonderful author. In this Research, five of Narayan’s works, The Dark Room, The Malgudi Days, The English Teacher, The Vendor of Sweets, are chosen for analysis to study the themes and establish its social relevance. Here in this Research Article let us deliberate on “The Dark Room”, and “The Vendor of Sweets” analyze its theme and study its social relevance.

Keywords: Indian writer; Social context; Fictional town, Awards; Themes; Social relevance.

Introduction: R. K. Narayan (10 Oct 1906 – 13 May 2001), was a great Indian writer, best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. He is one of three leading figures of early Indian literature in English alongside Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Narayan broke through with the help of his mentor and friend, Graham Greene, who was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's books including *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Narayan's works also include *The Financial Expert*, hailed as one of the most original works of 1951 and Sahitya Akademi Award winner *The Guide*, which was adapted for a film. His narratives highlight social context and provide a feel for his characters through everyday life. He has been compared to William Faulkner, who also created a fictional town that stood for reality, brought out the humor and energy of ordinary life and displayed compassionate humanism in his writing. In a writing career that spanned over sixty years, Narayan received many awards and honors.

The Dark Room

Theme

The central theme in most of Narayan's novels are the leading role's quest for identity but they are all of an average stature and incapable of bringing their quest to a completion. Savithri in the *Dark Room* protests against the rudeness of her husband and steps out of her house. She soon realizes that her lack of proper education renders her fit only for a degenerate life. So she returns to her husband's house, where at least she can discharge her maternal duties to her children.

Setting: With its street names and institutions like Vinayaka Mudali Street, Ellaman Street, Kabir Street, Abu Lane, Lawley Extension and Albert Mission College, Malgudi in its setting is the miniature of the multicultural society that Indian towns were becoming during the previous century. From silent movies to talkies as sources of entertainment, a new film studio being established and new industries coming up, Malgudi has been growing from a country town to a city over the years. Gradual development from the British Raj to Independent India is marked by the early presence of companies and banks owned by English men to the many new avenues of employment opening out in later times. The consistent working on the same ambience provides validity to the novels. The world outside Malgudi is suffocation for them. Savithri, who leaves home and her husband to assert her independence, steps out of the outskirts of Malgudi is restless till she returns.

Characters

Narayan excels as an artful constructor of characters. He says, if the character's personality comes alive, the rest is easy for him. His leading roles are individuals as well as universals in their aspirations and resolutions. They are simple to comprehend and remain consistent in behavior. Savithri laments over her husband's treatment but she enjoys the luxury of the sophisticated upper middle class life that her husband provides for her. Ramani oscillates from a strong to weak man. Children are engaging Savithri and are attuned to her joys and hopes. The very thought of children brings her back home and makes her accept her defeat.

Analysis

In fiction, who tells the story and how it is told are critical issues for an author to decide. The tone and feel of the story, and even its meaning, can change radically depending on who tells the story. The author and the narrator are merged or distanced and a similar exercise on the receiving end of the reader and the narrator. This angle of vision, the point of view from which the people see, events and details of a story are viewed and considered when reading a story. In the *Dark Room* Narayan maintains the author's narrative point. But when strong feelings and thoughts of Savithri have to be recorded, he focuses them from Savithri's point of view, which is not wholly reliable. She is unreliable because her protest is an outburst of the moment, without consideration of her own abilities to sustain it. It is the words of Savithri, as a point of view that helps Narayan to distance his strong feelings towards "the place of women in the orthodox Indian Society."

Social Relevance

Every work of art is rooted in its society. It may perpetuate and champion the existing one, suggest reforms by being critical of the existing phenomenon or suggest improvement, without giving offence. Narayan's narrative is identified by many critics like Iyengar, Naik, Narasimiah and others as well grounded in his socio-cultural matrix. When Narayan began his writing career, in 1930's the country was passing through its freedom struggle. The British in India did not work for great development of the country or its people. The country was backward in every respect. A few educated people like Ramani in the *Dark Room* was employed in the companies run by the British. Place of women was subjected to serious study during the time. Narayan in his autobiographical work, *My Days* writes: Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunningness that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence,

her individuality, stature and strength. The place of women, however, shows signs of improvement in his later novels.

Savithri's protest however should not be viewed as a total failure. It is the representation of women rising above their restrictions, in the process giving a death blow to orthodox patriarchy.

The Vendor of Sweets

Theme

In *The Vendor of Sweets* once again the theme is man's quest for identity and self-renewal. The hero Jagan is a sweet-vendor by profession, follower of the Gita in thinking and talker of Gandhian principles but he indulges in double dealing in matters of money and also cheats sales-tax authorities. He comes to realize that money is evil when his son, Mali, comes back to India with a Korean girl, Grace and asks for money for his business. Jagan finds new life or a new birth in his retirement, when he surrenders his business to his cousin. His fragile Gandhian self-regard collapses before his much-loved son's strange actions and after Mali ends up disastrously in prison as a result of driving drunk around Malgudi, Jagan has no option but a Hindu-style renunciation of the world, bewilderment and retreat to a simpler life. But even here his ideal of Sanyasa is spurious as he still holds the purse string.

Settings

The love and marriage, their devotion to God and their celebration of the festivals make the Malgudians come alive. The simplicity of the vendor and the innocence of his customers is touching when they spend half an hour discussing politics, before asking for sweet meats and their price.

Characters

Jagan and his son Mali are the main characters and two other minor characters are Jagan's cousin and the Korean-American girl, Grace. Jagan looks a typical sham of Mahatma Gandhi dressed in khadi clothes but crazy over money. He cheats the sales tax authorities with no scruples and spoils Mali by giving money. Mali, an average youth longs to have western way of life like American studies, possession of foreign gadgets, consumption of meat, wine and free sex. Jagan represents the superficial aspects of the East and Mali the weaker aspects of the West. A college dropout, Mali attracted by the West contracts relationship with a foreign girl, Grace. Mali rejects his Indian past and tries to imitate Western life. His driving in a drunken state brings him to jail. Jagan-Grace relationship proves that East-West synthesis is also possible. Grace, the unmarried, casteless, foreign girl, has concern and consideration for Jagan in her attempt to be a

good Hindu daughter-in-law. She learns diligently the Indian way of life and maintains the house clean. Jagan on his part understands her difficulty brought by the misdeeds of his son. What prevents Grace from settling down in India is not any error on her part, but her money gets exhausted and Mali would have nothing to do with her. Jagan is willing to get her an air ticket if that would be of help to her. Earlier he ignored the comments by his relatives for bringing a foreign lady into the household. But Jagan is not without his weaknesses. He follows Gandhism but cheats income tax people consoling him that Gandhi did not mention anything about income tax. He reads Gita but cares for caste.

Analysis

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Narayan adopts a Selective wise point of view, it is the father–son relationship or the conflict of two generations which plays the dominant role in developing the action and shaping the narrative. The experiences and events in the life of both the father and the son, therefore, occupy equal importance in the novel. Narayan, however, turns the story from the point of view of the father. All the events and happenings in the novel are described as seen through the eyes and mind of Jagan. To provide the full view of Jagan’s life and character, Narayan uses flash on and flash back techniques.

Social relevance

As western modernity enters Malgudi and its own native values are corroded. Presence of an Insurance company in *The Dark Room*, the studio on the bank of river Sarayu in Mr.Sampath and story writing machine brought by Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* indicate that Malgudi is already growing as a civilized commercial center. Change is not only spatial and temporal but also cultural and social.

Mali lives with Grace, an American-Korean even when they are not married The orthodox Hindu society that Malgudi is, excludes Jagan for being a Gandhian , mingling with all kinds of people and courting arrest, then for allowing a girl to stay in his house, even before her marriage to his son.

Conclusion

So, the study of different aspects of narration like theme, setting character, and the social relevance bring out the world view of Narayan. A study of Narayan’s characters reveals that Narayan is a realistic writer with an eye for the weakness in human temperaments and aspirations.

The internal intention however is to bring a positive frame of mind. Although most of his characters are anti-heroes who aspire with fewer efforts to achieve their goals, the message is embedded. As readers we can understand their weaknesses responsible for their failure.

That style is an excellent form of narration because instead of preaching, Narayan makes his readers deliberate on their own and take fruitful decisions. He considers his readers as intellects and reflects that in his works. That is probably the best gift an author can give to his beloved readers.

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