

## Socio-Cultural Milieus in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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### ABSTRACT

The present article intends to explore the various socio-cultural milieus in the novels of R. K. Narayan (1906-2001). Among Indian writers in English, he was one of the most accomplished and well-known throughout the English-speaking world. He not only reflects socio-cultural milieus in his novels, but also he criticises society for a better manner of living through his subtle irony. His novels can be regarded as more or less a socio-cultural chronicle of Indian society. Set in the fictional town of Malgudi these narratives record the realistic portrayal of life and characters of the middle-class milieu. Malgudi offers the novelist socio-cultural milieus rich enough to portray all types of characters with a realistic touch and sketch worldly-wise people.

### KEYWORDS

Socio-Cultural; Milieus; Matrix; Society; Chronicle; Characters; Subtle Irony; Ascetics.

### Introduction

The present article intends to explore the various socio-cultural milieus as evident in the novels of R. K. Narayan, the most popular Indian writer in English of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He was critically acclaimed by great writers in the west, like Graham Greene, and Ford-Maverick-Ford. John Updike, William Walsh, and others.

He picturises predominantly lower-middle-class Indian society of ineffectual dreamers, the usual beggars, the cricket-mad school boys, confidence tricksters, bogus sadhus, and other never-do-wells. He gets inspiration for his stories and his characters from day-to-day events, and people of the middle-class milieu and set them in the imaginary Malgudi of South India. The widespread and universal appeal of Narayan is due to the predominant middle-class milieu. His

novels reflect the social context that determined his worldview

### **Narayan's Portrayal of two aspects of the 20th Century: Casteism and Western Impact:**

This paper examines critically the various Socio-cultural milieus in the novels of R. K. Narayan. It deals with caste-ridden Hindu society which Narayan presents in his novels. He visualises the egalitarian society in his novels. In the novel *The Guide*, R. K. Narayan expresses his views on casteless society and speaks through his protagonist Raju: "I don't believe in class or caste. Things have changed. There is no caste or class today." (84)

Narayan expresses this in the novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, "If India wants to attain salvation, these watertight divisions must go, community, caste, sects, sub-sects, and still further divisions" (83). A similar view is expressed in the novel *The Painter*

of *Signs*, Auntie asked Raman about Daisy's caste: "What is her caste? Is not she a Christian? Raman says: "I'll ask you not to bother about it...she is a human being just like you and me. That's all." (146-147)

Cultural conflicts are portrayed in the novel *The Vendor of Sweets*. According to Narayan, the Indian population is not a problem. It is proved that a large middle-class younger population in the world is an advantage for the growth of the Nation. The novelist believes that if we grow more food we can easily feed our growing population. Once it was the National crisis which is portrayed by the role of Daisy as a family planning officer in *The Painter of Signs*. Indians follow the custom, dress, and manners of English men but we do not follow the time management and technicality of English men and we do not equip ourselves with the required expertise in our field. Development of skills is not of top priority for Indians. In *The Guide*, Raju floating in life does not equip himself, but he bluffs his way through acts of an impresario, without knowing anything about dance.

#### **Narayan's Portrayal of 20th Century Education in Indian Society:**

This paper examines Education in Indian society regarding the novels of R. K. Narayan. It is reflected in the first novel *Swami and Friends* and on the first page itself. The Indian School system does not produce a conducive atmosphere for the learners; instead, it gives boredom to the students. Swaminathan an average boy does not like to think about school on Monday after having enjoyed the Sunday holiday; even the thought of it is bitter for him:

It was Monday morning Swaminathan was reluctant to opening his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday. (3)

R. K. Narayan boldly criticises colonial educational institutions. He resented anything that cramped the soul and believed in a return to an educational system based not on rote learning but on storytelling, games for the young, and appreciation of Indian culture. The writer advocates his educational philosophy in his novel *The English Teacher*,

This education has reduced us to a nation of morons. We were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leaving and garbage. I am up against the system, the whole *method, and approach* of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons but efficient clerks for your entire business and administration of office source. (203)

R. K. Narayan carried on an untiring crusade against the memory-based Indian system of education throughout his writing career, through a series of ironic jibes at schools and teachers. His deflation of the existing education system in his novels requires to be studied from what he had said in a fourth right statement (In the article 'My Educational Outlook'). Krishnaswami(2006) quotes the statement in his article published in 'The Hindu' Newspaper:

As a member of Rajya Saba, R. K. Narayan made children the subject of his inaugural speech, highlighting the issue of the crushing burden of the heavy school bag.

#### **Narayan's views on the place of women in Indian Society:**

The author describes the Hindu society where men rather than women held a superior position. Of course, Narayan does not propagate women's liberty with loud bang and cry in the spirit of a social reformer or committed artist. But confirmed it within his aesthetic aim and

purpose.... that is why, women characters over time, change, grow, and mature. Narayan comments in *My Days*:

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of a woman as opposed to man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence her individuality, her stature and strength. The wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances. (132)

*The Dark Room* offers a feminist view of contemporary south Indian society. It echoes the frustration of a tormented wife. More especially it was with a feminist view of middle-class family life in South - India. Narayan sees life as it is; and not as what it should be. He speaks about gender equality through his protagonist Ramani in *The Dark Room*: It was all nonsense to keep men and women in water-tight compartments; women were as good as men and must be treated accordingly (73).

He portrays a male chauvinistic society in *The Dark Room*. Savitri the heroine of the novel revolts against her husband. Her revolt against the moral erosion of her husband is a silent struggle to claim and enjoy equality with her husband. In effect, a woman fights for her equality with men. It is a fight for gender equality.

Savitri is an ideal Indian wife. She can never think of indulgence in a controversy with her husband. Thus, after her decision of leaving home, she is caught in a conflict between her wifely devotion and her new individual existence. This story has beautifully crafted the marital status of a couple interlaced with conservatism along with the dawn of

reformists' ideas. The story entails the tale of a tormented wife. *The Dark Room* is a superb examination of a patriarchal society. A study of his women characters reveals a mild trend of feminism and the author reflects on the place of women in the society in his literary works.

The heroine in *Waiting for the Mahatma* can be assumed as representing the third stage in the development of a woman. Narayan has portrayed her in a very loving manner and seems to become one of his best and most lovable women characters, ideal in every sense. She is a sweet, charming, pleasant, confident, assertive, determined, courageous, bold, and dedicated young woman with high moral values. She is probably the embodiment of virtues possessed by a modern woman as idealized by the novelist.

In *The Guide*, Rosie remains subservient to male domination under Morco in the beginning and under Raju later. But once she identifies the evil in Raju, she asserts her individuality, stature, and strength. Neither Marco nor Raju can now change her self-sustaining will.

In the *Painter of Signs*, Daisy pursues her career as a family planning officer, even at the cost of her personal life. One can see how Narayan's women forsake the all too exclusive role of a homemaker to experience self-actualization. There are of course any number of women in his novel who conform to the dictates of the patriarchal society, accepting subservient roles. However, the distinction makes all the difference. We see, his women of later years maturing to assume social roles.

A close study of Narayan's novels shows that social ethos is well-grounded. Most of the critics describe the formalistic features like character, plot, etc. Few critics have written about the impact of socio-cultural milieus on his work. Most of his critics concentrate on the individual character than society. The study shifts the focus to contemporary social elements

hidden abundantly in R. K. Narayan's novels.

### **Conclusion:**

The new approach to relating Narayan to his socio-cultural milieu renders his novels a worthwhile hunting ground to unearth the sociological implications of his novels. He not only reflects the contemporary society in his novels but criticises it to work for a better order of living through his subtle irony. Narayan's novels are a serious critique of his contemporary society. To achieve this new order; casteism is one of the major obstacles in our society. The second is, of course turning materialistic, forgetting the value system, under western impact. If India is to rise to the status of global power,

the people must outgrow their competitive self-centeredness that marks the present rat race and preserve Indian culture that prioritizes self-actualization.

Education, as practised in India, is a legacy of Macaulay that was interested in churning out clerks for the British administration. It should undergo drastic revision if Indians are to be the Managers and intellectually superior in coming eras. They should be alive to the great opportunities and potentials in the emerging world and play lead roles in it. Indian woman should be granted their rightful place in the scheme of things to bring out their potential to fruition, and to enable them to share responsibility in material development.

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