

The Theme of Education in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan is one of the most popular writers in the realm of Indian English Literature. He famously created the fictional town of *Malgudi* and populated it with a variety of people whose stories he narrated in his novels and short stories. He is a keen observer of life around him but does not take up an active role of preaching any ideology. He burdens neither his characters nor his readers with his views keeping a neutral authorial stance most of the times. And yet, he expresses his strong antipathy to the formal education system in his writing without any ambiguity. This is a recurrent theme to which he returns again and again. He voiced his concerns, regarding the impact of educational practices on children, in the Parliament when he was a member of Rajya Sabha. The present paper studies Narayan's preoccupation with the theme of education and his distaste for the oppressive English system of education. An attempt is also made to investigate his personal experiences by juxtaposing the autobiographical elements in his writing with his life.

Keywords: Education; Colonial; Curriculum; British Empire; Nation

R. K. Narayan has often been considered a 'Pure' artist; an author writing primarily for aesthetic purpose without any social, political or reformist agenda. One reason for such an approach is historical. Though he began writing in the 1930s, which was a very volatile era in the political history of Indian nationalist struggle for freedom, his novels stay away from engaging in any political debate. The only exception being *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) but it was published after India's independence and the novel primarily focusses on the personal life of the protagonist albeit against a politically charged background. He usually writes in a self-absorbed, objective and even limited manner about the fictional town that he created. He offers a parallel to Jane Austen who wrote at the time of Napoleonic war without showing any direct involvement or influence and like her, he seems to be sitting on the fence unaffected by the events in his surroundings. "At a time when the country was going through the travails of the struggle for freedom, he wrote simple stories about the domestic life of the middle class people, living in or around Malgudi, Narayan's imaginary town in South India. He is content like Jane Austen to remain engrossed with in his own ivory tower" (Sharma 43). Narayan has often been called a non-committed writer due to his apathy for social evils and a lack of interest in any political cause or ideology which remain negligible in the literature he produced. Yet, every artist is a product of a particular age and the confrontation with social problems shapes the artistic awareness which is bound to be reflected through the chosen medium. Every literary work has an indelible mark of the writer and his time frame and R. K. Narayan is not an exception. He is famous for the objective treatment of his subject matter. His characters are not overtly burdened by his own beliefs giving the reader freedom to read without any pressure from the authorial morality. Yet, a close reading of his novels shows a nuanced handling of the issues close to his heart which is reflected in his choice of stories, characterization and situations demonstrating his artistic acumen. "One constantly thinks of Narayan as combining documentary, fable, and the shrewdest commonsense" (Walsh 89). He refrains from dealing directly with the contemporary issues but the raw material for his fictional world of *Malgudi* are drawn from his cultural ethos which provides characters to inhabit his artistic universe. Thus, the contemporary world and its problems inevitably find their way into this enchanted land. Narayan was writing at a time when the prevalent sentiment in India was critical of the foreign rule with more and more people were actively participating in the struggle for independence. In such a charged scenario, Narayan could not have remained completely neutral to the British Empire and his sentiments found expression in the rejection of their

education system by his literary characters. His anguish against the colonial status of India can be discerned in the pessimistic view he takes of the English education in his novels. "That Narayan comes back to the subject of education in novel after novel is an evidence of his concern with one of the basic issues of Gandhian movement that considered English education in India complete wastage" (Jha121) Consequently, Narayan's novels show the recurrent theme of children and young people abandoning their formal education which at that time followed the English pattern to explore their aspirations like the author himself.

Gauri Viswanathan in her book *Masks of Conquest* (1998) studies in detail the motives of the British government behind the introduction of English to the colonized subjects. "The nineteenth-century Anglicist curriculum of British India is not reducible simply to an expression of cultural power; rather, it served to confer power as well to fortify British rule against real or imagined threats from a potentially rebellious subject population"(167). She goes on to explain how literary texts were used to circumvent the official British policy of non-interference in the native religious practices to avoid any administrative problem. The British education system in India was envisaged as a tool to secure and consolidate the colonial enterprise by making the Indians internalize the superiority of the dominant culture and accept it. She illustrates her point by quoting essays written by Indian students in their university examination feeling grateful to the colonial masters for "improving the native mind and condition" (140). The irony of an Indian student using the term *native* for his own people is a proof that the British system of education was achieving the intended target successfully. The purpose of this education was to produce a class of people, envisaged by Macaulay in his *Minute on Education* (1835), trained in English morals and intellect. These people could be recruited in public employment for the smooth functioning of the colonial enterprise. Most of them would become copying clerks engaged in mechanical writing of English. "Without honor or reward, these meager employment prospects were adversely affecting the traditional Indian reverence for education and the self -esteem that usually accompanied it" (Viswanathan 149). It seems apt that Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) is advised, after his graduation, to apply for the post of a clerk in some government office because it ensured a steady income along with the sense of security. It was what most of the university educated Indians did but Narayan's Chandran rejects it outright showing the disdain the writer had for this type of employment. Narayan was also a product of this flawed education system and it is not surprising that he hated school and also the system of

being prescribed a set of books to be evaluated at the end of a year without giving any importance to real learning.

Narayan documents his thoughts in his memoir *My Days* (1974). He attended the Lutheran Mission School. Narayan was one of the few non-Christians and the only Brahmin student in his class. He recounts his experiences at this time, “The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol-worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus” (10). Narayan’s dislike for foreign education seems to have developed at this stage. More than that, it was also a matter of irrelevancy. In the mission school, Narayan was taught. ‘A’ stands for ‘Apple’, while he was living in a part of the country devoid of apples. This baffled his young mind and he was left as clueless as the rest of the class including the teacher who was unable to explain what an apple looked like. “We were left free to guess each according to his capacity, at the quality, shape and details of the civilization portrayed in our class books” (Walsh 13). He remembers in his memoir how his grandmother taught him to make up for “the inadequate education I got in school” (9). Narayan also resented the unwarranted seriousness of school which made him depressed. He observes in *My Days*, “My outlook on education has not really improved with the years...I was opposed to the system of being prescribed a set of books by an anonymous soulless body of textbook-prescribers, and being stamped good or bad as a result of such studies” (59, 60). He remembers the year he failed in university entrance examination with fondness because it gave him free time to read what he liked without the shackles of syllabus or the fear of a test.

This dissatisfaction with English education finds expression in the very first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935). It would be interesting at this point, to compare Swami’s distaste for this kind of education to his author’s own tryst with school. The novel opens on a Monday morning which is unwelcome for the little boy who “shuddered at the very thought of school” (1). Narayan shows the flaws of the education system from the perspective of a ten year old boy who feels bored by the useless drill of mugging and copying without understanding anything. The only class he seems to enjoy is the History class because the teacher “conformed to no canon of education” (2). Consequently, he ends up with bad grades, humiliation and punishment. Swami’s unrest with the education offered in Albert Mission School voices the anxiety of the whole nation at a time when this new system was fast becoming a norm in India. “The inability of the child to cope with the examination system, his inadequate involvement in the process of learning is shown to be due to unreal

and mechanical system of education” (Jha122). The situation worsens due to the humiliating behaviour of the scripture teacher who makes fun of Hindu gods. Swami’s questioning of the moral standards of the Christian god is the expression of the angst of the author who similarly suffered in his scripture classes when he studied in the Lutheran Mission School. Narayan is revisiting his childhood trauma as he describes the fears and anxiety of the child protagonist. Through the story of Swami, Narayan is demonstrating that children need to develop cognitively and they need to acquire skills of thinking rather than merely acquiring factual information. Children want to live in the world of their unrestrained imagination unfettered by logic and reason. When Narayan wrote this novel, he remembers his far-off boyhood days and became a boy himself painting the world of a child in vivid details. “underlying Swaminathan’s experiences, imaginations, likes and dislikes, one realizes Narayan’s aim: to portray through mundane reflections the general psyche of an average Indian schoolboy, perpetually harangued by the Anglo-Indian teachers, in an Indian English medium school” (Putatunda 5). Swami is mercilessly beaten with a cane in the Albert Mission School because of his participation in the protest march and he refuses to go back there. Later, he is also punished in the Board High School for missing his drill classes while he is actually engaged in physical activity for cricket practice. Swami’s defiant act of snatching the cane from the hand of the Head Master shows his pent up anger and impatience. His decision of desperately running away after his bad experience even in the second school is actually a failure of the system which does not allow the child to realize his potentials in a happy and safe environment.

The Bachelor of Arts carries this theme forward through the story of Chandran, a student of Albert Mission College whose college life is described in detail. He feels a sense of relief when he finishes his college “And now, without college or studies to fetter him, Chandran was enjoying a freedom he had never experienced in his life before” (Narayan 53). The educational institutions seem like prisons where young people have to follow the dictates. Chandran does not know his life goals after investing sixteen years of his life in this education system and is befuddled by the suggestions of friends and relatives about the career he should choose. This is what the author himself went through and he remembers in *My Days*, “Nineteen-thirty, when I attained a belated graduation, became a year of problems” (79). This is indeed a telling comment on the efficacy of the education. This system fails not only its students but also the teacher which is the theme of the novel *The English Teacher* (1945) inspired by Narayan’s failed attempt at becoming a teacher.

The novel describes the mundane professional life of Krishna who teaches English in Albert Mission College, Malgudi. It is the same college where he was a student and nothing seems to have changed. This is a grim reminder of the fact that such a stagnant place cannot offer any chance of personal or professional growth. The typical day at work is described in the opening chapter as he goes about his work mechanically without deriving any real pleasure or satisfaction. He is shown mugging his lessons every morning and forcing the unwilling students to do the same for succeeding in the examination. He describes reading the text books “for the fiftieth time” for “admonishing, cajoling and browbeating a few hundred boys of Albert Mission College so that they mug up Shakespeare and Milton and secure high marks and save me adverse comments from my chiefs” (1). The intense discussion about a dropped vowel exasperates him and he wonders why such a fuss is being created. Krishna goes on to question the need to learn the language of the colonial masters and asks whether the college Principal Mr. Brown has learnt any of the two hundred Indian languages during his thirty year stay in the country. His boredom, anger and unhappiness is a clear proof that he is not satisfied with his job and he looks forward to write poetry in future. “The education both Swami and Chandran receive is wasteful one and Narayan’s dislike for it is apparent by now...Krishna...is a clear instance of this continuing trend introduced in both Swami and Chandran. Right from the inception of the novel, Krishna is at loggerheads with the existing educational system” (Putatunda 6, 7). *Swami and Friends*, *A Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* comprise a trilogy of autobiographical novels which together seem to confirm Narayan’s total rejection of English education system from the perspectives of a student as well as a teacher as experienced in his own life.

This issue is close to Narayan’s heart and he comes back to it in *The World of Nagraj*(1990). Nagraj, the protagonist, is shown to be a typical product of foreign education which prepares Indians for white collared clerical jobs and the protagonist does the same at Coomar’s shop though unpaid. Nagraj does not accomplish anything throughout the course of the novel and the reason seems to lie in his faulty education. The borrowed newspaper from which he keeps repeating some news-articles, without having any understanding or without offering any explanation if desired, offers a parallel to a similar borrowing of a language without any real understanding. “He loved the English language, though his application to its studies was vague and haphazard and he had obtained only marginal credit for his performance in the examination” (Narayan 97). This blind love is also apparent in his frequent use of Shakespearian quotations which he has

picked up from a book of tit bits. It is humorous to see Nagraj's reverence of this demi-god, "Shake-speare, of course, source of ninety percent of world's wealth of quotations, no ninety nine percent. The balance of one percent shared by the Bible, Koran, Bhagwad Gita, Palgrave's Golden Treasury" (Narayan 173). This brings to the mind Macaulay's infamous statement about the supremacy of English literature. Nagraj's slavish worship of foreign language has given him nothing but a disdain for his own heritage. He is not only ignorant of Sanskrit but also holds a very contemptuous attitude towards it and calls it a dead language. However, the "mission" of his life cannot be completed without Sanskrit. His futile attempts at writing *Narada's* story are handicapped by the lack of knowledge of Sanskrit and he fails to do much in this direction and proves himself to be good for nothing. As against the meaninglessness of Nagraj's existence is projected Gopu, the elder brother who becomes a foil to his character. Gopu has also done his B.A. and had been a better student than Nagraj but he has chosen to disown this education and renewed his ties with the world of village and agriculture. Gopu becomes the role model and representative Indian; for 'India' is to be found in villages. Gopu's prosperity seems to suggest that Indians have to get out of the glamour of English influence to realize their potential and give the right direction to their energies. Gopu is successfully managing his farm with the help of latest inventions to gain the best results becoming the example of growth and creativity. On the other hand, "Nagraj seemed impervious to the value of agriculture, horticulture, or any culture" (Narayan 54). Gopu tells Nagraj that it were better that he was not given the farm and village property otherwise he would have ruined everything. This seems to be an extended observation implying that left in the hands of people like Nagraj, India which is an agricultural land, would be similarly ruined. Gopu sets the pattern for active enterprising principle as against passive uselessness of Nagraj's existence. The text gives us examples of successful people like Coomar and Bari who flourish despite the lack of formal education while Nagraj does not do anything fruitful. He lives on the money his father has left and is simply incapable of anything productive, which is reflected in the fiasco of his book on *Narada*. It is not surprising that Tim, who stands for the next generation, also leaves the Albert Mission College rejecting his uncle's dream of having him formally educated. Nagraj's incapability of handling, understanding and confronting Tim adds yet another instance to the many failures of his life. The novel seems to hope for a better India free in the real sense of the clutches of, not only foreign rule but also foreign influence. Thus, Narayan's interest in the educational practices remains a constant focal area from the beginning of his writing career till the very end and

he advocated this cause tirelessly.

When Narayan was nominated to the Rajya Sabha and served as a member of the upper house, he raised the issue of educational practices followed in the country. In his maiden speech in the Parliament on 27th April 1989, Narayan highlighted the plight of children over-burdened by the education system pointing out the heavy bags they were carrying each day to school which could cause grave damage to their spines as they stoop like chimpanzees. He also criticized the regimentation of uncomfortable school uniforms and the paraphernalia associated with school making young children physically uneasy; thereby hampering the learning process. He called attention to the restrictive environment and the punishments which make the school a dreadful place for the children. He lamented the plight of the young ones who were left with no time to play, dream or imagine because of the incessant demands of the school system. He pleaded to “devise a remedy by changing the whole education system and outlook so that childhood has a chance to bloom rather than wilt in the dreadful process of learning” (Parliamentary Debates 184). This emotional speech shows his lifelong engagement with the problems of education system introduced by the colonial government for subordinating the Indian populace. His initiative stirred the government to delve into the crisis of school education and his intervention resulted in the formation of a committee under Professor Yashpal which gave its report in 1993 recommending to reduce the curricular burden to enable the children to learn in a relaxed and happy manner. Though it has been almost thirty years since this report came not much seems to have changed on ground. But it has paved way for similar discussions and debates to improve the prevalent practices in the area of education. The questions which Narayan raised in the Parliament and through his writing are relevant even today because rote learning is still a very important part of education in India. In fact, it seems to have magnified because of the obsession with perfect scores, coaching colleges and high cut offs. The hapless students keep scrambling for some sense of sanity amidst the incessant demands of school, tuition and entrance examinations. R. K. Narayan shows through his sensitive handling of this issue that he is not just a great writer but also a crusader for educational reforms which remain at the very core of his writing.

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BIO-NOTE

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