



Rural Life in Indian English Fiction – with special reference to R.K Narayan

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The preamble to the Indian Constitution begins with the words – ‘India that is Bharat’. The urban rural divide in socio-economic terms in India, is reflected faithfully on the pages of Indian-English fictional works. The transition of Indian English fiction from pre-independence to post independence era, coincided with the perceptible change from the traditional values of a largely agrarian society, to the agro-industrial modern age and its industrial economy.

The Big Three of Indian English fiction - Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan and Raja Rao produced timeless classics that capture the essence of Indian rural life-through rural milieu the and rural characteristics. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand’s acclaimed village trilogy – comprising three novels :- ‘The Village’ (1939) , ‘Across the Black Waters’ (1940), and ‘The Sword and the Sickle (1942) – highlight the changing facets of the rural milieu through the varied experiences of the protagonist Lal Singh. ‘The Village chronicles his journey from childhood to youth in a village in Punjab. The second novel ‘Across the Black Waters’ present Lal Singh’s evolution as a soldier in British army in alien lands. In the third novel ‘The Sword And The Sickle’, Lal Singh returns to rural Punjab to witness widespread changes in the rural milieu – the cart driver’s son driving a motor bus, a farmers son serving in a factory, and the landlord’s widowed daughter getting married to the protagonist without raising social eyebrows.

In ‘The Big Heart’, Mulk Raj Anand depicts the travails of village copper smiths like Ananta, whose livelihoods in rural cottage

industry are snatched away by a factory established by urban dwellers.

In Raja Rao’s Kanthapura and Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve too, the transition in Indian rural milieu is portrayed realistically. The pastoral childhood world accompanies the agrarian realities – shifting from the serene rural locale to the impersonal, insensitive urban locale. The protagonists mostly encounter difficulties in adjusting to the warped, materialistic, self – centered urban values.

R.K. Narayan used rural areas of Mysore as the prototype for his mythical Malgudi – that represents the Indian ethos in the countryside. Even in the midst of social flux – life goes on in its own familiar manner on the lanes, by lanes and markets of Malgudi – shopkeepers engage in their regular trading, farmers work on their farms, housewives complete their household chores – and petty criminals carry on their nefarious activities. Narayan’s fictional plots are constructed around the pattern of ‘Order- Dislocation – Restoration.’ The rural ambience of Malgudi changes and expands very little. The intrusive forces of history brings to it crisis and conflict – as well as the excitement and frustration of the new replacing the old. However, its quintessential ambience remains- though its outward images may vary. The Mempi hills, the quiet flowing river Sarayu, and Malgudi’s unequivocal spatial poise between Trichy and Madras – define its geographical and rural ambience. The railway trains running from Malgudi to the city- act as the connecting link between rural and urban. Malgudi gets transformed into the locative heartland – with its streets and lanes –its colonies and extensions,



pulsing to its steady rhythms, and tidings in time. Still, the protective protocols and traditional ethos are hardly ransomed away to urban mutability and social flux-extending from traditional to modern.

The first four novels by R.K. Narayan – Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), The Dark Room (1938) and The English Teacher (1945) – depict the multifaceted elements of rural milieu in Malgudi while the boyhood escapades of the mischievous boy Swami light up the serene rural ambience of Malgudi. Chandran's youthful aspirations in The Bachelor of Arts and Savitri's domestic tutmoil and quest for identity in The Dark Room – alongside marital loyalty, commitment and spiritual communion with his deceased wife Sushila – offer vignettes of human persona.

Mr. Sampath (1949) chronicles the rise and fall of an over – ambitious protagonist Sampath. Materialistic greed is the prime cause of the downfall of both Margayya in The Financial Expert (1952), and Raju in The Guide (1958). The bitter sweet love story of Sriam and Bharathi in Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) – is in direct contrast to the vile pretensions of Vasu, the taxidermist in The Man Eater of Malgudi (1962), which is modeled upon the Bhasmasur – Mohini episode in Hindu theological texts. Vasu – the spoiler of scenic rural natural ambience – is deservedly destroyed by divine law. The Vendor of Sweets (1967) presents generation gap and communication gap between the sweet vendor Jagan, steeped in traditional rural values, and Mali his son-who has imbibed materialistic, self- centred Western values.

The protagonist Raman and Daisy in The Painter of Signs (1976) – too follows the common refrain of the rural – urban dichotomy. Noted critic M.K. Naik aptly remarks :”Narayan's fiction is imbued with a strong sense of place. His common fictional backdrop Malgudi – develops from novel to novel- but always possesses a genius locus which gives reality to his men and women.”

R.K.Narayan has acquired global reputation for his expertise in the deft delineation of human desires, aspirations, joys, sorrows and anxieties. Critic K.R.S. Srinivasa Iyenger observes: “Narayan's art is the art of resolved limitation and conscientious exploration – he is content, like Jane Austen, with his little bit of ivory, just so many inches wide :he would like to be a detached observer, to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place .

Narayan's depiction of the socio-economic and cultural realities of rural India has deservedly enabled him to acquire a tag of the great narrator of Indian ethos, especially in the rural domain. His novels shall remain abiding testaments of rural ambience and rural populace. As time flies, R.K. Narayan's fictional works acquire more and more relevance and significance, enabling readers to see India through the prism of Narayan's eyes and record in memory forever the multifaceted dimensions of India, especially rural India.

References

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