

I N T R O D U C T I O N

India is a country of many languages and literature. English, though basically a foreign language, has, by force of circumstances, come to occupy a place with the native languages of the country. It continues to be treated as a second language in the country even today, but the literature that it possesses is richer than those of many other native languages. It has obvious advantages over the Indian languages. Like the native Indian languages, it also developed in India through Indian writers. The Indian writers who wrote in English had, generally, a wider acquaintance with the literatures of the west. This ensured for the writer a wider market. English being the language of the rulers of the country possessed a respectability which the native languages did not enjoy, and this proved to be another source of encouragement for the writers who patronized it.

The cultural renaissance which took place in India in the second half of the 19th century encouraged the growth of Indo-English literature no less than that of the native languages. The Indo-English writers wrote in all genres, but initially poetry received the greatest emphasis. Generally fiction outstripped the other genres as it has happened in the case of most literature of both the east and the west, and today a large number of writers in Indo-English literature consists of those who worship the Goddess of fiction.

*

*

*

The story of Indo-English fiction is the story of yesterday and today. In the 19th century a few Indian writers dared try their hand at writing fiction in English. This diffidence was caused by the fact that writers in Indo-English literature could not overcome the inferiority complex which centuries of foreign rule had instilled into them. The Indian writers were handicapped in expressing their ideas in a foreign language which many of them had learnt only through books.

The novel at last appeared in the field of Indian -English literature. Smt. Raj Laxmi Devi, Kshetrapal Chakroverty, A. Madhaviah, S. B. Banerjee, S. M. Mitra, Sardar Jogindar Singh, Bal Krishna, Sorabji Cornelia, S. K. Ghosh, T. Ramkrishna, K. S. Venkatramani appeared with their novels. These writers were experimenting with this technique to make it effective as well as impressive. In spite of hurdles at the initial stage the progress was satisfactory. These writers gave us social, historical and detective novels but historical romance was very much popular. Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan Raja Rao, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shasthi Brata, R. P. Jhabwala, Narantara Sehgal and a host of others are writers of today.

Indian-English fiction is written in a language which is not the mother-tongue of many India writers nor is it mother

tongue of the people about whom the novels are written. This involves double complications but it also helps to make Indo-English literature a part of world literature. The description of various aspects of Indian life through a language which is not of Indian origin, the novelists are confronted with a number of problems but the one advantage of writing in Indo-English is to get a wider readership and better prospects of recognition.

* * *

The period between 1900 - 1950 was dominated by novels with Socio-political themes. But during the period 1950 - 1980 the acknowledged master like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and others continued their art of fiction writing. The fiction of Mulk Raj Anand on social criticism and political emancipation produced great effects. He dedicated his art of fiction to India's struggle for freedom from imperialism. However, we can not ignore the social tensions depicted in Modern Indian novels. The presentation of religious and mythical traditions has been very successful in the novels of R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. The novelists Like R. K. Narayan, Santha Rama Rao, R. P. Jhabwala and Nayantara Sehgal take their characters and subjects from urban middle class life. They expose the vanity, sentimentality and hypocrisy in course of probing the depth of love, passion and power.

// From the study of R. K. Narayan's novels we form an

idea of the author as a shy and highly sensitive person but it remains to be verified from his personal contact. His mother tongue is Tamil. He has settled down in Mysore where the regional language is Kannada and he writes in English. His locale is invariably 'Malgudi', an imaginary town, in the Taluk in which he was born and brought up. In some respect he follows the foot-prints of Henry James. His concern is not the fate of the community and even of an individual but the change that a contact with the world brings about in the character of the individual. Therefore, the subject matter is confined only to life and activities of the middle class people of the country, but in the later novels a greater depth is attained.

*

*

*

✓ As a writer of social novels, Narayan has a light approach to life, and as such he stirs no deep human emotions. He is generally realistic and photographic. The details are accurate but there is also an explanation of the souls of his characters, who mainly consist of College boys, teachers, School-masters, merchants, municipal members, tourists -- guides and taxi-drivers -- most of them from lower, middle and poor classes of Malgudi. His perception of the conflict between the present and the past is more detached and impersonal than that in most other novelists. He has tried to bridge the gulf between the two. Mulk Raj Anand rightly remarks:

R. K. Narayan is meticulous craftsman.

He interprets the mood of his characters.

He determines the pattern without overt intervention.

And thus he achieves organic composition as on canvas where comparisons and contrasts bring out the internal crisis of the human personality. ⁽¹⁾

R. K. Narayan has not only attracted a large number of readers, writers and reviewers but has also received critical acclaim from Indian and foreign critics. He has received excellent response from E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, William Walsh, and McCathion. Most of the universities in India have provided for the study of Narayan at the graduate and post-graduate levels. He has been drawing the attention of the research scholars on different aspects of his novels. The present study of R. K. Narayan's novels is an humble attempt to assign the novelist his due place among Indo-English novelists.

*

*

*

It is against this background that one can understand and appreciate the contributions of R. K. Narayan to the realm of Indo-English fiction. Narayan surpassed them not only in sheer volume but also in the size of canvas and the variety and complexity of characters he has created. The small town of Malgudi is the epitome of the whole of the Indian nation and the inhabitants of the town

emerge as the representatives of the whole of India and also of mankind itself. Perhaps he has no compeer in Indo-English fiction in this respect.

// It is the fate of man that his desires are never fulfilled, but it is also his glory for in the effort to obtain fulfilment he changes and improves. Narayan reveals the individual and his personal hopes, hungers, loves jealousies and ambitions in the context of the social background. His final result arises from the individual conflicts of his characters and the manifold conditions of human life. A great work of art expresses the pattern of life itself. R. K. Narayan gives to the creative art the key to reality when he shows the pattern and the place which each individual occupies in it. The whole procession of creation is the agony of the artist in his conflict with reality in his effort to fashion a truthful picture of the society and the world around him. Narayan does it carefully and skilfully.

In Narayan form and content are not separate and passive entities. Form is produced by content. It is identical and never remains passive. It is his outlook on life, his touchstone for reality. It is true that novel-writing is a philosophical occupation in so far as the novelist has to have a philosophical attitude to life. Narayan poses no philosophical attitudes; he is rather pre-occupied with the philosophy of social reality which is expressed through the characters and the story. In his critical appreciation

of Narayan William Walsh points out :

Narayan has depicted in his novels the life in a hypothetical town of Malgudi, its mediocrity, its pathos and its comedy with a rare irony and compassion ... Narayan, in his Malgudi novels presents members of the Indian middle class as engaged in a struggle 'to extricate themselves from the automation of the past.'⁽²⁾

Narayan writes with complete objectivity, a strange mixture of humour and irony and an underlying of beauty and sadness. He tries to project the true image of India through his meticulous portrayal of Indian life, landscape and characters. His recreation is artistic and also convincing.

An artist is required to make an interesting story out of an ordinary incident of day-to-day life. We see Narayan starting with an idea and the story finds logical development out ^{of} the idea. He presents most realistic pictures though they belong to a world of fantasy. His angle of approach is entirely intellectual with the result that he is an analyst of actions and motives. This intellectual humour runs through the pages of his novels. R. K. Narayan has a gift of a serious artist. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar correctly remarks about his artistic excellence.

He is one of the few writers in India who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument, pursuing with a sense of dedication what

may often seem to be the mirage of technical perfection. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan can not possibly lower himself. (3)

// His observation of human oddities, eccentricities angularities, hopes and frustrations is always with tolerance and a quizzical grin. He applies humour and irony with control and understanding tenderness. As a true artist, he does not stand between the reader and the story which is allowed to take its natural course, shape and identity. He is never anxious to give his readers a knowing look. He carries no message, no doctrine. Though he is a writer with a philosophy he does not allow the philosophy to overshadow the story or the characters.

The Indian reality, which finds expression in his novels, is an image of a venerable, wise, but unsophisticated India. Ours is a land of contrasts, Paradoxes, ambiguities and of contradiction between the old and the new. It is a land of poverty and the parade of riches, of caste, which divide and also unite innumerable festivals, and of complicated rituals of birth, marriage and cremation. It is a land of confusion and mystery, and, at times, of religious frenzy which is akin to madness. Yet there is reality in this image of India which R. K. Narayan projects in superb prose.

Like other Indo-English fiction writers, Narayan has the advantage of a traditional frame of reference and concepts like 'Maya', 'Karma' 'Dharma' and 'Moksha' having their full meaning for his characters. The acceptance of past traditions and indirect treatment of socio-

political issues gives Narayan a central place in Indo-English fiction. His presentation of the Indian scene is strictly in accordance with his innate sense of art, subtle economy of his comic technique and simplicity of language.

Narayan is the novelist of middle class people and his greatest charm lies in portraying Malgudi and its people and making them real to us. He depicts places, situations, but succeeds in making them uncommon by attributing universality to them. There^{is} nothing heroic about his heroes. He himself admits:

"I have no heroes, only non-heroes".⁽⁴⁾ His heroes are naive and always involved in one crisis or another. In this respect all his novels follow the same pattern. They are sometimes pitted against unsympathetic conditions. Most of them believe that everything on this earth is pre-destined and managed by some super power. Narayan's common themes are Indian beliefs and superstitions. He also deals with human relationship. Family is his immediate concern.

Narayan seldom goes into higher religious and philosophical questions which interest novelists who intend to cash in on the religious and philosophical heritage of India. But he emphasises like Shakespeare, the basic virtues of life which dispel the darkness of ugliness and make life worth living. He does not value success in the sense in which it means the attainment of power and pelf; he has, in fact, an anti-money attitude towards life as most of his goal characters enjoy temporarily and return to tolerant poverty and

simplicity in the end.

For him real success is the attainment of goodness which is the real source of happiness for both the individual and the community.

R E F E R E N C E S :

1. M. R. Anand : "Old Myths and New Myths : Recital Vs. Novel" (Banasthali Vidyapeeth, Spl. number 13th July, 1969), The Banasthali Patrika, p. 15.
2. William Walsh : A Human Idiom, p. 133.
3. Iyengar K.R.S. : Indian Writing in English, p. 359.
4. Hindustan Times, Dec.3. : 1968.