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R.K. NARAYAN'S FICTION: A WINDOW TO INDIAN CULTURE AND ITS CONFLICTS

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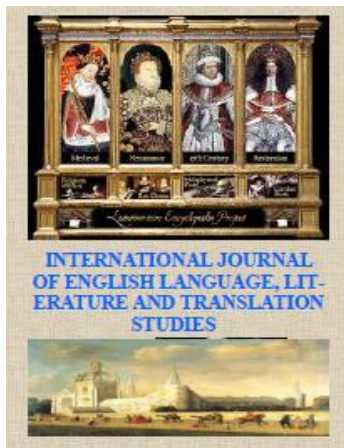
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the fiction of R.K. Narayan helps in understanding the nuances of Indian Culture and its conflicts with some examples from his works. Narayan's literary creations are colourful fabrics woven with the intricate threads of Indian culture such as traditions, customs, religious beliefs, faiths, social hierarchies, family system, bitter & sweet melodies of love and marriage, conflict between Indian and foreign cultures, gap between generations, etc., albeit with the touch of humour.

**Keywords:** Malgudi, Culture, Traditions, Fiction



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INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan portrayed India of his times and its customs and traditions, myths and magics, epics and fairytales, to the outside world, in a non-serious manner. To paint the complex yet vibrant culture of India, he has chosen a bigger canvas in the form of a fictitious town called 'Malgudi'. Narayan created a Mini-India in Malgudi, so as to bring out all the essential characteristics of Indian culture.

**Narayan's fiction:** Window to Indian Culture in Transit: Narayan's novels and short stories reflect almost all the elements of Indian culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in their conflicting form on different issues, which is elaborated below:

- **Religion:** Hinduism and Hindu traditions and customs play a dominant role in the fiction of R.K. Narayan. In his stories, Narayan portrays the conflicting environment of religions and religious faiths. In the novel 'Swami and Friends', when Swami complains against his fanatic teacher Ebenezar for his venomous criticism of Hindu Gods and traditions in the classroom, it appears more as the inner feeling of Narayan against the propagandists of Christianity. In 'The Man Eater of Malgudi', the festival procession is organized to celebrate the poet's completion of his epic on Radha and Krishna.

In the novel, 'The Vendor of Sweets', the protagonist Jagan is considerably influenced by the Bhagavadgita.

The four Ashrama Dharmas of Hindu way of life also are intervened in Narayan's stories. In 'Vendor of Sweets', the protagonist Jagan finally hands over his business to his son and leads a retired life in an ashram. In the novel 'A tiger for Malgudi', even a tiger also goes through the four ashramas. The novel "The Painter of Signs" presents the dilemma of the modern generation over religion.

- **Indian Philosophy:** Indian culture does not attach much value to money and physical attainments. But, the western influence on material acquisition is on increase in 20<sup>th</sup> century. This conflict is very well presented in Narayan's works. The novel 'Mr.Sampath' reveals the general Indian belief in the futility of running after money. 'The Financial Expert' also echoes the same philosophy. But, the materialistic philosophy of life has humorously been presented by Kailas in 'The Bachelor of Arts', who says: "A man must spend forty years in making money and forty years in spending it."
- **Myths and Magic:** Narayan writes about the myths and magics in his novels, which may appear unconvincing to the modern and western readers. In his autobiographical novel 'The English Teacher', the protagonist Krishna, after the death of his wife Sushila, communicates with her spirit, with the help of a Sanyasi. Frequent use is made of Indian myth and legends in his novels and short-stories. An Indian myth (Bhasmasura) forms the background to 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi'.
- **Superstitions, Rituals and Beliefs:** Narayan frequently narrates the rituals, superstitions, traditions and beliefs as if they are quite common and credible in Indian context. Many popular superstitions, rituals and beliefs are frequently exploited in his novels and short stories.

In 'The Guide', there is fasting to bring down the rain, and Raju is easily taken to be a Mahatma by the credulous villagers. Communication with the spirit of the dead is also shown in 'The English Teacher'.

- **Belief in stars and fate:** Astrology plays vital role in the day-to-day life of Indians. The conflict between the believers and non-believers in stars and fate is frequently seen in Narayan's stories. In 'The Bachelor of Arts', there is mismatch between the horoscopes of Mr. Chandran and his dream girl Malathi. In 'The Financial Expert', Margayya is assured of a better future by an astrologer. In the same novel, another episode reveals how "money can dictate the very stars in their courses." In the short story "An Astrologer's Day", Narayan presents an astrologer who dons the role under forced circumstances.
- **Respect to Sanyasis/ Godly men:** Indian culture respects the Sanyasis and Godly-men without waiting for a proof of their virtues or miracles. The role of Sanyasi, whether as a truly remarkable and powerful holy man in 'The English Teacher' and 'The tiger for Malgudi' or as a cheat in 'The Guide' or merely as a wanderer in 'The Bachelor of Arts', is a recurring character in Narayan's fiction.

Foolish veneration of Sanyasis reaches such a height in 'The Guide' that Raju, originally, a cheat, mistaken by the villagers as Sanyasi, is worshipped by them. Interestingly, Raju is compelled to live in the character by fasting for twelve days to appease the rain gods.

- **Family system – Patriarchy, Place of women and elders:** Almost all the works of Narayan show the traditional patriarchal family system where the men are dominant and the women are true representatives of traditional Indian womanhood. However, in his novel 'The Darkroom', the central character Savitri questions the patriarchal family system and women's place in it. But, she too realizes the futility of her attempt to escape from her bonds with the temporal world and returns home. In the same way, Rosie in 'The Guide' shows her essential Indianness in her solicitude for her husband. Perhaps, this is the reality that exists in Indian family system which Narayan wanted to project.

Narayan presents the conflicts pertaining to family systems. In Swami and friends, Swami's grandmother tells him stories during bedtime. In the novel "The Painter of Signs", the aged aunt of Raman tends to her nephew's needs. But, in other stories like, 'The Vendor of Sweets' and 'The Financial Expert', the strained relations between parents and spoilt sons are seen.

- **Marital system:** The conflict between the concepts of arranged marriages and love marriages is frequently seen in Narayan's novels. Narayan gives reverence to Indian marriage and family system. He tries to present love episodes, some with success and some others with failure. In the novel 'Vendor of Sweets, when the son of Jagan returns from America with an American woman whom he did not marry, he is unwelcome in his own family. In the novel 'The Painter of Signs', Raman finds himself being torn between his Aunt and Daisy, the traditional way and the modern way.
- **Art and Literature:** Narayan's novels and short stories depict the writers, poets and other artists who are interested in creating the literature and art influenced by the ancient Indian classics, Hinduism and epic stories. The poet in 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi' composes a story of Krishna and Radha in monosyllabic verse. In the novel 'The world of Nagaraj', the protagonist is interested in writing about life of the great sage 'Narada'. Rosie in 'The Guide' is interested in dance. In 'The Painter of Signs', Raman is interested in art and calligraphy. Occasionally there are persons like Mohan (poet) in 'The Bachelor of Arts', who, under the influence of the waves of western art forms, try to experiment in them.
- **Language:** Narayan touches upon the issue of conflict between languages by referring to the education system of his times. The Education system introduced by the Britishers in India allowed the dominance of English language over the regional languages. The negligence of regional languages can be seen in the novels like 'Swami and Friends'- where the students don't pay attention to the Tamil Pundit's class but are very much attentive in English class.
- **Freedom Struggle and Gandhian philosophy:** The adoration to Gandhian principles and the hypocrisy attached to it are very well presented in Narayan's works. The plot of the novel 'Waiting for The Mahatma' has the freedom movement and Gandhian principles as background. In the novel 'Vendor of Sweets', the protagonist Jagan is a staunch follower of Gandhi. He wears Khadi and spins Charkha. But he is very careful about money and keeps two account books to avoid paying income tax – which shows the hypocrisy of his principles.
- **Corrupt Government and Hippocratic Officials:** The major and minor characters of Narayan's novels and stories pass their remarks on the inefficiencies of governments and corrupt acts of officials. In the novel 'The Financial Expert', Margayya manages the police, and contributes to the War Fund when asked to do so. In the novel 'The Talkative Man', the Station master at the Railway station is manageable with money.

## CONCLUSION

As seen from the above, Narayan's novels and short stories reflect the elements of Indian culture and the conflicting features in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They help non-Indians understand the vibrant culture of India in its widespread form. Further, the photographic narrative style of R.K. Narayan presents the cultural nuances of India in their realistic state than in the idealistic or imaginative condition. One who reads the novels or short stories of Narayan cannot help but appreciate Indian culture along with its shortfalls. Thus, it can be undoubtedly said that the fiction of Narayan is a window to Indian culture and its conflicts, to the outside world and foreign readers.

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