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SOCIAL VISION OF R K NARAYAN



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ABSTRACT:

In this chapter an attempt would be made to locate the social aspects of Indian society at the times of independence and after, as depicted in the novels of RK Narayan. The sole aim of this literary pursuit is to trace the social vision of author with respect to the life of Indian middle class. RK Narayan is one of the prominent writers of Indo-Anglian fiction. He is placed among the trilogy of Indian English writers which comprises Dr. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao apart from him.

KEYWORDS : Social Vision, social aspects of Indian society, Gandhian whirlwind, solely devoted.

INTRODUCTION:

All these writers are considered as the vocal voices of the of two later stages of Indo –Anglian fiction, which are –

1. Age of religious and political awakening (upto 1920)
2. The Gandhian Era (1920 to 1947)
3. Independence and after (1947 onwards)

Though RK Narayan’s four initial novels were published before independence, but he is mainly considered as the conscience shaper of India after Freedom. R K Narayan is the by product of the Gandhian whirlwind which swept across the freedom struggle. Though influence of Gandhiji on R K Narayan is not so prominent, still he displays keen observation on the events marked due to Gandhian influence. Apart from this little Gandhian corner in his literary canvas he has been remained solely devoted to showcase the social strokes of the time in his works, which are-

1. Swami and Friends (1935)
2. The Bachelor of Arts (1935)
3. The Dark Room (1938)
4. The English Teacher (1944)
5. Mr. Sampath (1949)
6. The Financial Expert (1952)
7. Waiting for the Mahatma (1955)
8. The Guide (1958)
9. The Man Eater of Malgudi (1961)
10. The Sweet Vendor (1967)
11. The Painter of Signs (1977)
12. A Score of Short Stories Collection

All the novels of Narayan are social comedies of reflective nature. Let us now trace the social vision exhibited by the Narayan in his novels, by discussing the events of these novels under various social aspects, like-

1. Social vibes caught without indulging himself
2. Realism in child’s world of Innocence
3. Socialistic aspirations of youth’s world
4. Socialistic aspects in money matters of society
5. Unrevealing the social complexities of the time
6. Realistically show- casing the political mash – up of the day

Catching the Social Vibes –Without Indulging Himself:

Narayan closely observed the society and present the people through his characters with perfect objectivity, without making them the mouth-piece of any preconceived ideology. He sincerely portrays man in relation to society in his novels. Narayan’s realism is not only the surface realism. He has transcended the concept of realism on the critical and socialistic plain and has evolved a new type of realism. Narayan’s realism has no ideological slant, like his contemporaries i.e. Mulk Raj Anand’s favour for social reform or Raja Rao’s sickness for spiritual contemplation. Narayan never lose his moorings in description of society. After close reading of R K Narayan’s novels it is difficult to draw a line of clear demarcation between reality & fantasy. T D Bruton comments in these regards-

“The vein of fantasy predominates, his (Narayan’s) escapism and triviality.”¹

But it is not true; fantasy is often a part of social reality especially in the Gandhian context. At

any particular moment or situation in his fictional world, fantasy becomes a part of reality and to understand this familiarity with Indian background is a must. For example, regarding supernatural communication in *The English Teacher* Narayan's comment to Ved Mehta was -

"Of course," Narayan said gleefully, "the reviewers did not realize that the whole story was autobiographical- that I myself had been a witness to the experiments. But what's the use?" He signed, you don't believe it either."²

Same way, he presents the myth of 'Karma' just as a part of reality in the Indian context. No other motives seem to be running behind it. Thus, Narayan presents the Indian society as it is. He has no pre-decided inclination i.e. no justification or no condemnation. True colours, in as dark or light shades as they may be filling the Indian social life, have been exhibited through writings of R K Narayan.

Social Reality in R K Narayan's World of Innocence:

R K Narayan is master in revealing a child's mind. How sharply and closely, he is able to showcase child's world is a matter of wonder. In every sense he has proved himself as true child physiologist. Every minute detail has been followed while presenting the child characters. In his works R K Narayan introduced a lot of memorable child characters to Indian readers among them Swami is the pivot. Everything seems to be presented through his point of view. He enjoys company of his friend Rajam and Mani. Through these children mainly with Swami, he successfully tried to frame everything which bothers an Indian child. In this way, they become his mouth-piece to mark social realities related to child's innocent world, which are-

Child's Innate Tendency of Possession:

R K Narayan is more than close in showing the child's inherent quality of possession. This gets proved in *Swami and Friends*, where not only Swami but all other children are also affected by this tendency. In Swami's class Rajam is a newcomer. Swami's interest in Rajam due to his upper class belongingness upsets his friend Mani, who looks upon Rajam as a 'Menace to his position'. Their struggle is true representation of a psychological duel bothering a child's tendency of possession. As, written by the author-

This Rajam was a rival to Mani..... There were sure indications that Rajam was the new power in the class. Day by day as Mani looked on; it was becoming increasingly clear that a new menace has appeared in his life.³

Mani hates Rajam to the extent that he wants to kill him and throw his body in the river, but later on Mani accepts the friendship of Rajam. There is no callous enmity is showcased between the children of the novel of R K Narayan. Once they became friend, they forgot all the ill feelings and hatred. This marks another true representation of a child's psychology.

Child's Psychology to Follow his Elders:

On the same lines a child's inborn quality to follow his elders is brought out. Like the incident in *Swami and Friends*, When Swami and Mani visited the house of Rajam, despite of being free Rajam made them to wait a while as he has seen his father doing this. As in author's words-

"He had known that his friends were waiting for him, but he liked to keep them waiting for a few minutes, because he had seen his father doing it. So he stood for a few minutes in the adjoining room, biting his nails".⁴

Closeness to the Elders in Indian Family:

This is another prominent feature inculcated by the children of Indian society. Beyond the class they belong to, it is the most visible thing in a family that children are very close to their elders. Like, Swami is close to his granny more than his parents. She is the source of all the worldly knowledge to him, through her stories related to Hindu mythology and well known figures, she works as a close companion to a uprising child. Like, Swami simply opens his heart with her when asked over the excitement of Rajam's coming to his home-

"Oh, granny! he cried ecstatically, you don't know what a great fellow Rajam is."⁵

Same way, He told her the story of the first enmity between Rajam and Mani and their subsequent friendship.

Showcase of Child's Innocence:

A child's innate innocence is never missed while reading R K Narayan. Throughout his novel Swami and Friends one can observe this aspect. Like the incident from the same novel where Swami's granny asks him to bring fresh lemons from the market when she was suffering from colic. Despite granny's pain Swami ignore her instructions and went to play cricket. But he suffers from the pangs of conscience for the whole day, for not obeying his granny. He feels himself guilty and relieved only after finding her better on coming home. Thus it is the proof of a child's innocence.

On same lines, again he is easily taken in by the story of Coachman that he can easily turn twelve paisa into six rupees, to procure a hoop for which he has great wish. This innocence of Swami is in fact the innocence of all middle class children of the Indian society.

Portrayal of Simple Joys & Sorrows of Children:

R K Narayan's main character Swami is not the only child full of innocence. For instance writer shows worries of Shanker, Somu and Pea that their friend Swami departed from them after arrival of Rajam. The feeling of inferiority crept in them. That's why they nick named him 'Rajam's Tail'. They told Swami-

'We aren't not good enough for you, I believe. But how can everyone be a son of police superintendent?'⁶

Thus not only Swami, but all children in this novel are live representatives of their classes. Their joys and sorrows seem to be our own. They bring us our own forgotten days of childhood. They seem to be human beings from every angle and in their own capacity and that can be said the true success of a realistic author.

Fascination for Glamour:

Children have a natural carving for showing their possessions to their contemporary fellows. This quality has been observed skilfully by the author. There is an incident When Rajam promises to come to Swami's house, for which Swami makes grand preparations. He wants everything as compared to Rajam's hospitality.

Even he tells his granny not to call or come to his room, when Rajam is with him. When she asks the reason he tells her frankly-

"The fact is – you are, well you are too old".

As he was served by a servant in Rajam's house, he wants to make the same impression in front of his friend. So, for Rajam's visit he requests his father to land his room and asks mother to serve tea there.

“Mother, would you mind if I don’t come here for coffee and tiffin? Can you send it to my room?”⁷

Swami’s state of mind for his friend’s visit showcase a child’s psychology to imitate his subordinates. One can easily understand the concept of peer group pressure among children by these incidents, which is a constant truth.

Glimpses of Child’s Mixed Feelings of Anger, Disappointment and Fear:

Being human, a child is never far away from shortcomings. They have their own interests and there are their own fears, anxieties, feelings and concerns related to them. For example, Swami invokes God to turn pebbles into coins but when failed, R K Narayan rightly represents his state of mind in these words -

“The indifference of the Gods infuriated him and brought tears to his eyes. He wanted to abuse the Gods but afraid too.”⁸

This statement alone can depict the God-fearing nature of the whole Indian society. What type of person a child will become if his dedication towards God is being developed by fear and not by love? This is the naked truth of Indian society that worship of God is done here out of fear but not due to love towards him. With this little incident, author is able to read the psychology of not only that of a child in particular but that of Indian society in general.

In context of understanding the child’s psychology by R K Narayan, these words of David Cecil (a prominent critic of RK Narayan’s works) can be taken as the final stamp-

“Children are instinctive, they have strong imagination, vivid sensations, they see life as black or white and bigger than reality, their enemies seem demons, their friends angels, their joys and sorrows are absolute and eternal. The children have a tendency to exaggerate and it requires great psychological insight and understanding to paint the world from a child’s point of view. In this context, Narayan is to be compared to Charles Dickens.”

Socialistic Aspect in Depicting Youth’s World:

Not only the world of children is showcased in its true colours but the youthful world of Indian society is also presented realistically in Narayan’s second novel *The Bachelor of Arts*. Through his hero Chandran, he showcases every practical aspect of college life in first half of the novel, like-

Extracurricular Activities Coming in Way of Studies:

In the novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, writer showcases the duel going on in the mind of a youth related to studies and extra-curricular activities. This in fact represents the importance given to studies over other activities by the Indian society. One who is brilliant in studies side is considered as superior to others like- sportsman, actors & others. Indian youth often get confused between these two and it affects their studies also. For example, in the novel Chandran is a brilliant speaker and appointed as secretary of the College Historical Association but all this come in the way of his studies, however somehow he manages to pass the B.A. in the end.

Lessons Learnt for Practical Life:

In the novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran is not allowed to enter the Principal’s room by college peon Aziz. On this, Chandran’s mentioning of an ‘old coat’ does the miracle. He not only allowed him to enter but also start treating him in a respected way. Thus he learnt the practical lessons for his upcoming life.

Role of Friends in Life:

In the same novel like every youth, Ramu, Chandran's college friend, is an inevitable part of his life.

"Chandran squeezed the maximum aesthetic delight out of the experience and Ramu's company was most important to him. It was his presence that gave a sense of completion to the things."⁹

However, later on he realizes that friends are simply fellows who are brought together by circumstances. When circumstances change, the relation too snaps.

"Friendship- what meaningless expressions had come into use!"¹⁰

Thus real conditions of a youth's life become the guiding light for the hero, where he has to learn by his own experience.

Realism of Friendship:

The true meaning of friendship comes to Chandran later on. Through Chandran's father R K Narayan brought out this realistic nature of friendship. He said to Chandran –

"We can't afford to be always together, you know. Each of us has to go his own way".¹¹

This way author has brought his view regarding friendship. Narayan probably feels that friendship is what we regard it to be, an illusion or a reality. This is the ultimate truth one has to accept.

Realism of the commercial world:

Lust for Money-

Margayya in *The Financial Expert* and Raju in *The Guide* are striking examples of 'money – hunting men'.

Margayya, who is a middle aged ordinary money- lender, found money to be source to rise in social status. His philosophy is –

"It is money which gives people all this. Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us naturally if we have money in our purse."¹²

Some way, in *The Guide* Raju who left everything for sake of Rosie's love (even his mother), it is the lust for money which separated him from Rosie and finally lands him in jail.

The Realization - Money is Not Everything:

Margayya in *The Financial Expert* is crazy for money throughout his life, gets shattered by behaviour of his impudent, stubborn & vagabond son, who has grown so due to easy wealth. The same Margayya comes to conclusion-

"But money is not everything"¹³

At last he returns to his old place with realization that real joy lies in man's capacity of being satisfied in what he has.

Realities of Complex Social World:

Narayan depicts customs, traditions, way of thinking and living of people in his novels so clearly that every aspect of India has come on surface. Let us discuss some aspects in this regard-

Role of Father:

Almost in all his novels father-son relationship is very important. In *The Bachelor of Arts* the relationship between Chandran and his father is an ideal one. When everyone started advising

Chandran of his prospects after graduation, he opens up his heart to his father-

“Why should everybody talk about my career? Why can’t they mind their business?”

Father consoles him-

“It is the way of the world you must not let that upset you. It is just a way of courtesy, you see.”¹⁴

Same way in *The English Teacher* a father turns his back on all happiness of world, for the sake of his motherless small girl. But, all father-son relationships are not so ideal in society. In *The Financial Expert* the bond of love is one sided. Margayya’s excessive love & wealth separates his son Balu from him. Same way in *The Sweet Vendor* the loving father gets disillusioned by his son’s ingratitude. His lenient nature becomes the cause of ruin of his son Mali, who got arrested by the police.

Thus, every kind of father-son relationship of society is showcased by R K Narayan.

Generation Gap in the Family:

The generation gap is an inevitable part of human society. It has been truly represented in a lot of novels by R K Narayan like-

In *The Bachelor of Arts* while Chandran wants to marry the girl of his choice, this generation gap comes in the way. His father is liberal but mother is dominated by old customs and traditions. She rigidly believes in the superiority of the boy’s side-

“Whatever happened they would not take the initiatives in the matter, for they belong to bridegroom’s side and according to time honoured practice it was the bride’s people who proposed first”.¹⁵

Again, she is in favour of dowry & justified it in her own way-

“We can’t disregard custom.”¹⁶

In other novel *The Sweet Vendor*- Jagannath and Mali are representatives of generation gap in the Indian culture. Jagan tries to realize his own dreams in the figure of his son. He wants Mali to be a B.A and a ‘high officer’ but he is deeply shocked on his declaration that “I don’t want to study”. Jagan’s grief further intensifies on discovering that Mali is living together with a half American girl Grace that also without marriage. At last Jagan realizes this generation gap and get himself detached from his son.

“I am going somewhere; not carrying more than what my shoulder can bear. I am a free man.”¹⁷

Man-Women Relationship:

This is another prominent theme of R K Narayan. He portrays every type of husband-wife relationship present in Indian society. First is, where husband & wife lives in true harmony. In this relationship, wife’s only anxiety is the welfare of her husband & children. Sushila (*The English Teacher*) is fortunate enough to enjoy the love of her husband. Husband is also anxious & happy when Sushila comes with their baby-

“I cried: ‘Sushila, mind the door and baby,’I looked at her apprehensively till she was safely down on the platform, helped by her father”.¹⁸

Even, tussles between them bring them closer. But, not all the relationships are so fertile. Savitri of *The Dark Room* is the representative of thousands of wives of India, who suffer mental torture at the hands of their husbands. Other women character like Janamma also tries to convince her that women are destined to suffer.

“Janamma went on in this strain for other more recounting instances of the patience of wives: her own grandmother who slaved cheerfully for her husband who had three concubines at home; her aunt who was beaten every day by her husband and had never uttered a word of protest for fifty years”.¹⁹

On the opposite, her husband represents typical Indian husband, who knows that betrayal of his wife will not affect his domestic life anyway. At last, Savitri revolts against domination of her husband & leaves her house.....but nowhere to go, she comes to her domestic confinement. Thus, healthy or unhealthy it was the truth of man-woman relationship of RK Narayan's times.

Social Complexities in Indian Traditions:

Various customs and traditions are described with a keen eye, like-

- Settling marriage by telling horoscope of the boy and girl.
- Possibilities of marriage only in same caste and in same status.
- Marriage's proposal should be initiated by girl's side. Chandran's mother's remarks notable in this regard.

"...they must come and invite us to see the girl". "We have a status and prestige to keep. We can't lower ourselves unduly."²⁰

- Prevalent dowry system in Indian society. Margayya in *The Financial Expert* aptly remarks about his sister's marriages-

"By the time my father found husband for them there was nothing left for us to eat at home!"²¹

- Many superstitions, rituals and beliefs related to Sadhus, Sanyasis and Swamis which may be fantastic but credible in the Indian context. Like In *The Bachelor of Arts* Chandran's mother leaves the flower-thief the moment she notices that he is a Sanyasi. Also in *The English Teacher* Krishna's attempt to establish a communication with the spirit of his wife is an apt example. Same way in *The Guide* fasting by Raju in disguise of a Swami to bring down the rain. Also there are fantastic speculations from the villagers like- the movement of aero planes disturbs the cloud or the atom bombs are responsible for the drying up of the clouds.

All such things are pictured so keenly that they truly exhibit the panorama of social life in India.

The Political Mesh Up of the Day:

Like his contemporary writers, RK Narayan is no exception when comes to use the Indian struggle for freedom as the background of his novels. Politics being a part of life, Narayan can't ignore it. But at the same time, he does not use it for propaganda. He never aims to present himself as a devoted Gandhian. Like in *Swami and Friends* Gandhiji is seen addressing:

An earnest looking man clad in Khaddar stood on a wooden platform and addressed the gathering.

"We are slaves today, he shrieked, worse slaves than we have ever been before----"²²

Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* is often considered as a Gandhian novel like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchables*. All social vibes of the day like Gandhiji's liking for Hindi, his sympathy for the poor and the down trodden, his stay in Bhangi-colony are covered and found narration in his novels. In this novel, hero Sriram gets involved in the struggle for independence only because of his overpowering love for Bharati who is an active participant. Thus inspired and ordinary response to the Gandhian movement is truly presented through characters of Baharti and Sriram respectively.

Thus political mesh up of the day found proper place in R K Narayan's works.

CONCLUSION:

Narayan's success in bringing out the social reality of his time lies on the following platforms-

- While depicting basic human themes in context of social situations he is marvellous.

- There is richness and depth in his fictional world while dealing with realities of world of children as well as that of youth.
- He brought out aspects of social reality within family ties and in every relationship.
- Not only in family he takes social reality beyond to the extended world like village folk, city people and all other social issues, like dowry, marriage etc.
- Money matters are dealt on a socialistic & realistic plane.
- As politics becomes metaphor of social life, he recorded consciousness of the political tensions experienced by Indians.

Thus, R K Narayan presents the Indian middle class of the contemporary Indian society. His literary notings with regard to this middle class have a universal appeal. They will remain true for the "Middle class of India" in all ages to come. Once, in his essay in *Next Sunday (On humour)*, he designates his hero as

"The modern unknown warrior, who is the middle class man"²³

True to this, all his literary dwellings are replica of this ordinary social reality.

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