

A Spiritual Transformation in the Novels of RK Narayan

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ABSTRACT: The study explores the spiritual transformation in *The English Teacher* (1945), *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) and others novels of R.K. Narayan. Narayan uses his Indian writing style to tell the traditional wisdom through his live characters of novels. He discusses social and cultural contexts with the psychological implications of Indian society. The historic sense and perspective which are eulogizing the glorious past of India in Narayan's writing piece. The theme of racial, colonial and cross-cultural conflicts explores the Indian cultural values. Social evils like untouchability, caste, creed etc. show the pictures of Indian life with realistic concepts of common people. Narayan presents Gandhi as primarily interested in liberating the spirit of India, putting a nation of slaves on the road to liberation, initiating a spiritual revolution and rejuvenating the traditional, everlasting values of Indian culture, religion and philosophy.

Keywords: Spiritual transformation; traditional wisdom; social context; psychological implications; caste

INTRODUCTION

In *The English Teacher*, Narayan interrogates the relevance of Western educational system in Indian social and cultural context and the psychological implications that subsequently lead to the alienation of an individual from his cultural roots. Michel Pousse has pointed out that "Narayan has stressed three points which stand out in Gandhi's philosophy, namely, life is a never ending quest for truth, and secondly, individual peace can only be achieved within a well-defined social context and thirdly the reasons for the use of English language by Gandhi as a means of communication" (Pousse 31).

Michel Pousse opines that Gandhi used the English language as a tool and its perfection lay in its functional skill only but Gandhi's preference for the vernacular is widely known. R. K. Narayan reiterates this in *The English Teacher*.

Krishnan, the English teacher is used to question the colonial education system in *The English Teacher*. In the beginning of the novel, he voices his disagreement with Mr. Brown, the Principal of Albert Mission College regarding the importance of the English language and preserving the purity of English language and its uses of the vowels. Krishnan is not satisfied with his job which earns him a good salary of one hundred rupees. He says, 'I was constantly nagged by the feeling that I was doing the wrong work' (TET 2). The Western education system, according to him, promotes an impersonal education system in contrast to the *Guru-Shishya* relationship, a characteristic feature of the ancient education system in India. Krishnan is utterly disillusioned, disturbed and demoralized in his role of the English teacher in his college. He mulls at one point: *I was merely a man who had mugged earlier than they the introduction and the notes in the verity edition of Lear, and guided them through the mazes*

of Elizabethan English. I did not do it out of love for them or for Shakespeare but only out of love for myself. If they paid me the same one hundred rupees for stringing beads together or tearing up paper bits every day for a few hours, I would perhaps be doing it with equal fervor. (TET 12)

An introspective kind of a person with a "singular consciousness", he doubts the use and practicability of English education so much that he ultimately resigns from his job of an English teacher even though he is a product of Western education system in India.

Baffled at Brown's incomprehension because of his "Western mind, classifying, labeling, departmentalizing" (TET 179) approach, Krishnan is induced to become a part of a new experiment with education. The basic education propagated by Gandhi invariably provides an alternative to the English education in India. Gandhi writes: *I have no faith in the so-called system of education, which produces men by learning without the backbone of character. True education is that which helps us to know our true self, our soul, God and truth. Every branch of knowledge should have as its goal, knowledge of the self and exploration of the Truth. (Shukla 25).*

Self-realization is an essential and fundamental principle of the Gandhian philosophy of education. In his quest for identity, Krishnan is more or less a Gandhian character with his unique, racial, cultural, national, social and personal affiliations. He is caught between two worlds - the corporal world where he is engaged as a lecturer of English and the inner spiritual world where he draws strength from the spirit of his dead wife. Krishnan represents the dilemma of an Indian under the imperialistic regime. His resignation from the respectable job of an English lecturer at Albert Mission College and joining the headmaster's experi-

mental kindergarten school is an attempt to come to terms with his self.

In his search for the inner self and final realization, Krishnan is an autobiographical presentation of Narayan himself. Narayan has confessed this in *My Days: More than any other book The English Teacher is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction. The English teacher of the novel, Krishnan is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi, but he goes through the same experience, I had gone through. (My Days 136).*

Thus, the novel being autobiographical reflects Narayan's rejection of the Western philosophy of life and promotes the novelist's staunch belief in the Gandhian philosophy of self-realization.

Krishnan could be described as a true *Satyagrahi* in a sense that he is fighting an internal battle for truth and self – realization through the rejection of Western system of education, something which gets him good money, in favour of the headmaster's school, which gives him only a quarter of his former salary but satisfies his self. His interaction with the headmaster comes at a juncture when he is trying to come to terms with the loss of his wife and adjusting to his new role as a single parent. Through these encounters, he gradually realizes the importance of establishing a balance in his life. In the gradual process of self-exploration, he learns to renounce the mundane affairs of life which pose obstruction in self-realization. When he says "I mug up and repeat and they mug up and repeat in examinations.... This is a fraud I am practicing for a consideration of a hundred rupees a month....It doesn't please my innermost self" (TET 272); he is one step closer to the realization of self. With his final statement, "Let me assure you I'm retiring, not with a feeling of sacrifice for a national cause, but with a very selfish purpose. I'm seeking a great inner peace..." he actually lets go of the vestiges of the material world and finds a 'rare, immutable joy' (TET 280).

SWAMI AND FRIENDS

Narayan's writes with a historic sense and perspective, eulogizing the glorious past of India. He writes in the tradition of anti-imperial cultural nationalism that critiques Indian literature. He has thus cultivated a cultural identity in his writing. Ebenezer, a scripture teacher in *Swami and Friends* speaks of the "dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images" (SF 36) of Hindu culture which were unable to protect themselves when Mohammedans attacked them. This tirade on Hindu culture sets Swaminathan, the adolescent protagonist of Narayan and his friends at war with the imperialistic attitude towards Indian culture.

Swaminathan too is deeply stirred by the speaker's eloquence and shouts, "Gandhi Ki Jai" (SF 95). Other incidents in the novel which can be correlated to the Gandhian ideology are the burning of "foreign cloth" (SF 95) and the friendship of Swaminathan with a Muslim boy Akbar Ali "a nice Mohammedan" (SF 108) which is symbolic of communal harmony. Gandhi advocated the use of Swadeshi clothes. There was a calculated economics at the back of this belief of Gandhi. He wanted the people of India to be self-reliant. He dreamt of an India where the citizens would adopt and use the things made by their fellow men and women. When Swaminathan's Black cap is pointed out, "Young man, do you want our country to remain in eternal slavery?" (SF 97); he feels utterly ashamed, removes the cap and flings it into the fire with a feeling that he has saved his country.

The protagonist's direct participation in the strike, the atrocities of police on the Malgudians, the harsh treatment of the protagonist by the headmaster of Board High School and Swaminathan's rejection of the Western educational institution – all these incidents directly or indirectly are related to the multifarious economic, cultural, political and social programmes of Gandhi.

The theme of racial, colonial and cross-cultural conflict presented in *Swami and Friends* poses very simple yet sensitive questions with which every sensible intellectual was confronted during the 1930s and 1940s. Gandhi emerged as the most influential leader of the times by addressing these issues which bothered the intellectuals and common man alike. Most of the novels by R.K. Narayan reflect the influence of Gandhi and his ideology on the freedom movement and on the lives of people.

THE MAN-EATER OF MALGUDI

Narayan's novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), often regarded as his greatest work, is the perfect representation of the Gandhian principles of peace and non-violence. The serious intention of the writer here is to immortalize and reassert the Gandhian views on *Ahimsa* or non-violence. Hilarity and seriousness are yoked together to support the eternal truth of non-violence in the novel. Prof. K. R. S. Iyenger has aptly remarked: *The Man Eater of Malgudi jumbles the ingredients of comedy to excellent purpose and provides ample entertainment, but the undercurrent of serious intention cannot also be missed. (MEM 40)*

The Man-Eater of Malgudi is a close parallel to the mythological story of Mohini and Bhasmasura. The human values and demonic values are represented by Nataraj, the printer, and Vasu, the taxidermist respectively. Nataraj with his meekness and altruistic activities occupies a respectable position in the placid and

calm world of Malgudi. Narayan has depicted violence as an evil and vehemently exposed and criticized it on all levels – physical, psychological, mental, racial and cultural. But *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is exclusively centered on the conflict between violence and non-violence. Here, violence and non-violence are represented by Vasu and Nataraj respectively. Everything is peaceful and orderly before the coming of Vasu, who is a symbol of destruction and demonic activities. He is the product of neo-colonial ills; he represents industrialization, competition and economic modernization on the Western hegemonic pattern. The Malgudians have their inherent traditional code of conduct. They are not exclusively motivated by the motif of material prosperity, but adhere to the moral values of their ancestors. Social harmony, universal love and brotherhood are greatly treasured. Vasu, the power hungry taxidermist, indulges in poaching and womanizing and has apparently no respect for the values and sentiments of the people around him. Nataraj tells Vasu about the importance of non-violent speech, as did Gandhi during his life time. He says: *Aggressive words only generate more aggressive words. Mahatma Gandhi had enjoined on us absolute non-violence in thought and speech, if no better reason than to short-circuit violent speech and prevent it from propagating itself. (MEM 70).*

Nataraj, in juxtaposition to the materialistic Vasu, genuinely believes in non-violence and avoids all kinds of confrontation and conflict. He confesses that he could not be a successful enemy to anyone. Any enmity causes him discomfort day and night like a tooth ache. When his neighbours complain about the indecent, illegal and violent activities of his tenant Vasu; Nataraj seeks to evacuate him on other grounds, instead of straightforward telling him the reason why he should vacate. Vasu, however, does not concur with the pleas of Nataraj and continues with his licentious activities.

After Rangi, a woman of the temple, reveals the insidious plan of Vasu to kill the temple elephant Kumar, Nataraj devises his own plans to check this nefarious intention. After considering all his options, Nataraj ultimately surrenders to the non-violent ways of Gandhi. He says to himself: *Non-violence would be the safest policy with him. Mahatma Gandhi was right in asking people to carry on their fight with the weapon of non-violence; the chances of getting hurt were much less. (MEM 213).*

Narayan's repeated emphasis on the main motto of the novel i.e. 'evil flourishes to destroy' is categorically Gandhian. Gandhi also believed that evil actions and wrong means, always lead to disastrous end. The Gandhian epithet – as the means, so the ends – is marvelously highlighted through the novel.

A TIGER FOR MALGUDI

The Sanyasi in *A Tiger for Malgudi* upholds the Gandhian values of non-violence, love, understanding and sympathy. The central theme of *A Tiger for Malgudi* is Gandhian in the sense that the novel presents the victory of the Gandhian virtues over violence and rudeness. Narayan presents two sets of contrasting relationships between Raja, the tiger and the Captain at first and between Raja and the freedom fighter turned Sanyasi later in the novel.

The relation of the captain and the tiger is that of the master and the slave – the ruler and the ruled. This binary relation is mechanical, materialistic, momentary and compulsive; administered and monitored through cane and fear. These relations are polarized in a way similar to that of the colonizer and the colonized. But the relationship between the tiger and the Sanyasi is founded on love, mutual understanding and sympathy; hence it is eternal and enduring. The complete transformation of Raja, the tiger at the end of the novel suggests the victory of good over evil, of non-violence over violence. Raja, a transformed animal at the end says: *I tried to attain some kind of purification by reducing the frequency of seeking food. Nor did I kill recklessly as I used to in my jungle days.... Nowadays, I went into the jungle and stalked the littlest game, just sufficient enough to satisfy my hunger of the moment and not my gluttony. (ATM 159).*

The tiger is uncannily tamed by the Swami. He is purified and taught the noble truths of the Buddhist doctrine and is ultimately transformed into a creature who is an animal in its physical form only. His soul becomes pure and enlightened, like his master. Towards the end of the narrative, we see a tiger, who can understand his master's discourse on God (ATM 157), has the feeling of gratefulness (ATM 158) willingly suffers hunger for consecutive days and feels nobler (ATM 159) and has attained the supreme Satva as advocated by Gandhi. By presenting the most brutal animal as the protagonist and by showing a great internal transformation in the character, Narayan succeeds in conveying the message of non-violence. In his Preface to *A Tiger for Malgudi*, he writes that, "With the right approach you could expect the same response from a tiger as from any normal human being" (Narayan 10).

The main theme of the novel is non-violence which is the cardinal principle of Gandhi. The Swami who ultimately tames the tiger with love and spirituality was at one point an activist of Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India Movement. It is noteworthy here that R. K. Narayan has chosen a Gandhian character to impart the message of non-violence and love. Swami in an attempt to tame the violent tiger, Raja, explains the im-

portance of non-violence in life. His words spoken to Raja are echoes from Gandhi. He says: *Violence cannot be everlasting. Sooner or later it has to go, if not through wisdom, definitely through decrepitude, which comes on with years, whether one wants it or not.* (ATM 145).

R. K. Narayan has presented an encompassing view of Gandhian ideology and philosophy. The theory of *Karma*, spirit of oneness with all, the theme of transformation from materialism to spiritualism, the concept of non-violence are discussed in the novels discussed here, namely, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The English Teacher*, *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*. Narayan probably never met the Mahatma and didn't know him personally but he has superbly grasped and mastered the quintessence of Gandhian philosophy. In an interview with Susan E. Croft, R. K. Narayan avers: I liked Mahatma (Gandhi) personally and I wanted to somehow recount this. He was a very impressive person. I did not know him personally but I went to many gatherings he addressed. (Croft 31).

Chandran, the protagonist in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) is also concerned with the misrepresentation of the Indian history by the imperialists for their own selfish ends. Sriram, Jagan, Krishnan, Swaminathan, Chandran and the tiger Raja – all the protagonists in his novels are embodiments of various Gandhian virtues and his voice. They uphold the Gandhian principles of non-violence or *Ahimsa*, absolute truth or *Satya*, self-control or *Indriya-Nigraha*, celibacy or *Brahmacharya* and subscribe to Gandhian ideals of simple living, religious tolerance, love for all, brotherhood and are devoted to the eradication of social evils like untouchability, prostitution, casteism, rejection of Western influence and love for the dignity of labour, patriotism and nationalism. P. S. Sundaram remarks: *It is absurd to suggest that Narayan has not 'enlarged' that awareness in the sense of painting a picture larger than life. But the picture is all the truer for the restraint and fidelity with which it has been drawn.* (Sundaram 97).

Education was one of the primary concerns of Gandhi. The Macaulayan system of education which served the needs of imperialistic regime in India was decried by Gandhi. He preached on the same lines as Tolstoy and Ruskin emphasizing the significance of character, human values and spiritualism in an individual. To Gandhi, education meant “an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man – body, mind and spirit” (Gandhi 138). Character building constitutes a major part of the dynamics of Gandhian ideal of education. He advocated the three dimensional – physical, mental and spiritual – development of a learner. His plea for national language, vocational training and social ser-

vice during the course of education was inclusive of his concept of wholesome education. For Gandhi, the goal of education was to produce good individuals who would understand their social responsibilities. Swaminathan in *Swami and Friends*, Krishnan in *The English Teacher* and Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* interrogate the imperialistic educational system to ultimately denounce it in conformity with Gandhian ideals of education. Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Tim in *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) and Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) are examples of the ill-products of the Western education.

Gandhi considered fasting as one of the essential aspects of *Brahmacharya*. Fasting is believed to curb animal passion and assist in the process of self-control. Alcohol and non-vegetarianism are strictly prohibited in the diet proposed by Gandhi. In the later part of his life, Gandhi abandoned milk, even salt and excessive use of sugar in accordance with the requirements of body. Gandhi averred that *Brahmacharya* germinates discipline, morality, and courage in life. Jagan's control in his diet to some extent corresponds to Gandhian dietary ethics. Gandhi was not opposed to modernity and technology but he was critical of any civilization which undermined human beings and moral values. He writes: *I wholeheartedly detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites and go to the ends off the earth in search of their satisfaction. If modern civilization stands for all this, I have understood it to do so, I call it satanic.* (Mathur 34).

Gandhi was also against the Westernization in all forms. He avers: *Europe today represents not the spirit of God or Christianity but the spirit of Satan.... In reality, it is worshipping Mammon.* (Gandhi 144).

Gandhi considered the contemporary industrial civilization of Europe, a disease and evil for human race. He firmly believed in the ancient spiritual status of India in the world and remarks: *I would have our leaders teach us to be morally supreme in the world. This land of ours was once, we are told, the abode of gods. It is not possible to conceive gods inhabiting a land which is made hideous by the smoke and the din of mill chimneys and factories.* (Misra 61).

Narayan reproduces the same spirit and heritage of ancient India in *Swami and Friends*. To countercheck the proliferation of industrialization and technology, Gandhi suggested novel methods and means. He opines: *I believe that independent India can only discharge her duty towards a groaning world by adopting a simple but ennobled life by developing her thousands of cottages and living at peace with the world.* (Gandhi and Brown).

CONCLUSIONS

Narayan presents Gandhi as primarily interested in liberating the spirit of India, putting a nation of slaves on the road to liberation, initiating a spiritual revolution and rejuvenating the traditional, everlasting values of Indian culture, religion and philosophy. Gandhi called himself a sanataniist and a staunch Hindu. He believed in the universality of Hinduism and its philosophy. Gandhi's own renunciation is totally in accordance with the Vedic and Upanishadic paradigms. He fully observed the restrictions and jurisdiction of the principles of these old scriptures. The protagonists of Narayan follow the ancient Brahminical norms along with those prescribed by Gandhi. Narayan's fiction thus highlights the invisible unity between the life of Gandhi in his teachings and the principles and ideology in his fiction.

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