Abstract

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On

Subaltern Voices in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

Submitted by

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Preface

Subaltern Voices in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

Indians have to wait for the novel, to be called properly, until the Western impact on Indians and their culture, first as a functional, in the development of formal written prose, and then as an artistic medium. However, the real commitment of the novel was started with the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee whose first effort -- *Rajmohan’s Life* (1864) -- was in English. In India, novel as a genre was already established during third decade of the 20th century. Novel was immediately confronted by complicated problems: to reproduce life objectively to portray reality in the context of certain historical period, and reveal the psychology of human nature. A solution to these problems lay on the shoulders of eminent novelists like R.K. Narayan, Mulk RajAnand, Raja Rao and others and their contribution was highly appreciated by critics and readers.

R.K. Narayan has been regarded as the best Indian writer in the English language. The adjective ‘Indian’ needs to be understood on several levels. He is neither Anglo-Indian nor Indo-Anglian; he is very much an Indian both in spirit and thought. He dealt with great themes but with great simplicity; he carried his home, his cosmos, on his back, as did the ageless Swamis of India.

Sometimes some moments come in the life of a man which changes his entire life. Narayan also witnessed the same kind of moment in his life. The year 1930 witnessed the ‘breakthrough’ creative event in Narayan’s life. He visualized a small railway station. Suddenly its name “seemed to hurl view” and Malgudi was born. Quite literally, the Malgudi railway station put Narayan and, in a sense, Indian fiction in English on “the right track of writing.” Narayan always saw the birth of Malgudi as the pivotal moment of his writing life.

R.K. Narayan, the prolific writer, wrote fourteen novels, a number of short stories and articles. His novels can be studied in three parts. The early novels of Narayan are a sociological study of people’s manners and mentality in pre-independence days. *Swami and Friends, The Bachelor of Arts, The English Teacher* are the social novels of Narayan. In *The Dark Room*, Narayan dealt with the theme of marriage. The novel is described as an early women’s liberation novel. The novel shows how the traditional Hindu marriage could trap women in complete subservience. *Mr. Sampath* and *The
Financial Expert are the two novels that deal with the story of the men who want to rise and earn money at any cost. They represent modern man who aspires to touch the sky in a jump and ultimately come back to the same old ground. The later novels of Narayan reflect his metaphysical spirit.

Narayan’s religious sense of Indian myth is a part of his grip on reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience. The Man-Eater of Malgudi is based on the Hindu mythological legend of Bhasmasura. The Vendor of Sweets is based on the Hindu concepts of cyclical existence and four stages of human life. The Painter of Signs exploits with adroitness, the story of ancient King Santhanu mentioned in The Mahabharata. A Tiger for Malgudi is chiefly an exploration of philosophical Indian myths and metaphysical parables of Hindu religion. The Guide is the very interesting story of Raju, the tourist guide who turns out to be spiritual guide. The novel, Waiting for the Mahatma is an attempt of R.K. Narayan to introduce some part of Gandhism through a fine fabric of a love story of Shriram and Bharti.

This research purports to present an interpretation of R.K. Narayan’s novels from the subaltern point of view. The attempts are made to identify the subalterns and to explain why their voices are being suppressed.

The term subaltern refers to a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalised or oppressed. From Latin roots sub- “below”, and alternum- “all others”, subaltern is used to describe someone of low rank (as in the military) or a class (as in a caste system). It was originally used by Antonio Gramsci for the proletariat whose voice was not heard. It has since come to stand in for all subordinate subjects in society and has been revived in history to draw distinction between the elite and the non-elite within colonized society. The research shows that the concept subaltern is dynamic, it is not static. After the study it is observed that some are born subaltern, some are made subaltern and subalternity is thrust upon somebody.

The term subaltern was adopted by subaltern studies group, originally it referred to a loose condition of Indians and British historians under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, who since the early 1980s have dedicated themselves for offering a radical alternative to traditional colonial and elite nationalist versions of nineteenth and twentieth – century Indian history.
For the purpose of convenience the study has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter is devoted to introduce the author and explain the concept subaltern. The chapter number two, three, four and five are devoted to find out and explain the subaltern characters in the novels of R. K. Narayan and how their voices are suppressed. And the last chapter is an attempt to conclude the study.

Cauterization

- Chapter – I: Introduction

The chapter probes into the background of Indian Writing in English in brief and the contribution of R.K. Narayan to the writing of novel in Indian Writing in English. It also discusses the concept of subaltern from modern point of view.

It is universally accepted that every artist is the offspring of his age. R. K. Narayan is not exception to it. He has the advantage of both pre and post-independence period in India. As he was born in pre-independence period, it was natural for him to experience life of a subaltern; and he had grown up in the post-independence period so it is obvious; one can find liberal individuality and a sense of elite in him. He was under the British Rule and later on a Member of Parliament of independent India. By dealing with a variety of the themes like religion, child-world, family, education, corruption, freedom struggle, Gandhian philosophy, myths, art and literature, he had made a great contribution to Indian writing in English.

According to Derrida there are three dominant groups of elite, they are: dominant foreign groups; dominant indigenous groups on the all-India level; dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels. The fourth group is of subalterns and to which Guha used the term people as synonymous term for subaltern classes.

While talking about the mentality of the subaltern Gautam Bhadra in his essay “The Mentality of Subaltern: Kantanama or Rajdharma” in the book A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995 edited by Ranajit Guha, says that defiance and submissiveness to authority are the two essential elements of the subaltern mentality. It is well known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behavior of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. It is on account of this combination that the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favor of the rich and the dominant, at least as often as they have rebelled against the latter.
A close study of R. K. Narayan’s novels shows how the two essential elements of subaltern mentality are often found in his characters. As per the situation the characters behave in his novels. Sometimes they rebel against the person or situation in which they are found: and sometimes they surrender to the person or the situation whatsoever it may be, but, of course, it is suppressing. A number of examples can be cited from his novels. Take for instance, Swaminathan in *Swami and Friends*, tries to rebel in the school at some point and surrenders to the teacher as well as the strong students. Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* rebels against the customs and his mother, for getting married with Malathi, a girl whose father is of lower rank, but finally surrenders to both of them by marrying Sussila. Raju in *The Guide* is rebellious at one point and submissive at another point. Submissiveness and defiance, these two qualities of these characters not only constitute the subaltern mentality of these characters, but also make them round, difficult to understand. They grow and change as the situation changes and time passes.

- **Chapter II: Suppression of the Protagonist**

The protagonists of Narayan are meek, weak and deprived socially, economically. They try to raise their voice against the authority but their voices are suppressed by the strong forces of the society.

R. K. Narayan started his literary career, as a novelist, with *Swami and Friends*, Swaminathan, a small boy is the protagonist of the novel. As Narayan grows as a novelist his protagonist and his Malgudi also grow; in *The Bachelor of Arts* the readers meet Chandran, the protagonist as a college going adolescent who later on turns into a young man. Later on we meet Raju in *The Guide*, Ramani in *The Dark Room*, and Krishna in *The English Teacher*. Sampath in *Mr. Sampath*, Margayya in *The Financial Expert*, Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* Bharti in *Waiting for the Mahatma* and so on. All these protagonists are adults. The author is born in pre-independent India and progresses towards post-independent India; so to his protagonists. India was under the Raj and later on became free. The study shows, the condition of the subaltern is not always the same; it changes from time to time and from situation to situation. Some are born free but become subaltern, some are born subaltern and become free later on and unfortunately some are born as subaltern and die as subaltern. It is also found that some are born subaltern, some are made subaltern and subalternity is thrust upon somebody.
• Chapter III: Suppression of Women

Narayan puts no special emphasis on women, except women like Rosie in The Guide and Bharti in the Waiting for the Mahatma. Society, culture and history go hand in hand in making woman as subaltern and the sufferer. They lack economic, social and political power. The voice of women is suppressed by the male, society, customs, religion and history. It is observed that the centre of almost all the novels of Narayan is occupied by male characters, except Waiting for the Mahatma. It means the subordinate position is given to the female characters. Narayan himself said that if the personality of the central character comes to him alive everything comes after it. And if the centre of the circle is male then female is merely there to fill up the circle, whose radius is fixed by the novelist.

The journey of Savitri in The Dark Room, an early women’s liberation novel, of Rosie in The Guide and Bharti, an independent woman in the Waiting for the Mahatma, are very interesting. Jagan’s wife in The Vendor of Sweets revolts against Jagan and his way of living. Whereas Gracy is an American woman, who is free to do whatever she likes as her husband Mali says the same. The women like Susila, the headmaster’s wife and Krishn’ smother in The English Teacher are the women only to fill the vacuum of the circumference of the circle.

• Chapter IV: Suppression of Children:

Children live in their own world. They have their own, right or wrong, ideas and views. When they try to express themselves or bring their ideas into reality they are governed by their parents and elders, society and the members of the institutions like school, temple and their voices are suppressed. Either it may be the meek and weak Swami or the strong and powerful Rajan or Mani all are the sufferers. Being a keen observer of children and their psychology, Narayan started his career as a novelist with Swami and Friends, the novel that deals with school-going children and their tender world. In the story Father’s Help; Narayan deals with the world of children. The journey of Mali in The Vendor of Sweets from a small boy to a grown up man is handled very tenderly and carefully by Narayan. Krishna’s daughter and headmaster’s children in The English Teacher also show a different aspect of the child world.
• **Chapter V: Suppression of the Poor**

Poverty is one of the causes of suffering. Even though a poor is right, he has no right. Almost all the characters of Narayan are either from middle class or from poor class. They are suppressed and made silent either by the rich class or by the society. It is true that there are no characters from the rich class in the novels of R.K. Narayan; but there are some occasions on which it is found that either the representative of the rich class or the rich class is the background in the novels. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* the boy of the untouchable shows how the voices of the untouchables are suppressed. The small shopkeepers are the sufferers who can neither sale British products, nor remain without sale. In *The Bachelor of Arts* the question of status comes between the marriage of Chandran and Malathi. Though the headmaster in *The English Teacher* is very devoted to teaching and innovative in adopting teaching methods, but the adverse effects of poverty are found on his family. In *The Vendor of Sweets* captain, cook and other servants and the beggar are the poor people and Jagan was like a general of military or a kinglet for them.

• **Chapter VI: Conclusion**

The final chapter is the summary of all the findings of the research. The study shows that the concept of subaltern is dynamic and not static. Subalterns are those; whose human rights are violated, and the infringement on their rights is made either by some nation like England or by society, or by the rich class, or by the male. It is also found that some people are subalterns at some place and elite at other places. The role of people being elite is not static, but dynamic. Some are subalterns by birth and some are made by somebody or something. There are a number of characters in the novels of R. K. Narayan who are either subalterns or experience a state of being subalterns at some place or at a certain stage in life. They are protagonists, women, children and the poor and minor characters. The study shows that not only people but some places and things are also subalterns. The place where Gandhiji liked to stay; the place where the untouchables live as it is seen in *Waiting for the Mahatma*; in *The English Teacher* the place where the headmaster lives and his school are also subalterns, on the contrary, the college like Albert Missions College, where Krishna teaches, is an elite place. It gives some another shades of meaning to the term subaltern, i.e. neglected, not liked or not preferred by the elites. Subalternity is a state of mind where a person thinks or forced to think that he or she is a subaltern. It is a way of thinking, society, culture, history, economy, education all
go hand in hand in paving the way for this kind of thinking. The moment one realises this, he or she ceases to be a subaltern and raises the voice as Krishna, a child of Macaulay, realises it. The moment he realises it he ceases to be a subaltern. He makes up his mind to resign. He is against the British Education System. He says that it is a system “which makes us (Indians) morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your (British’s) business and administrative offices.” He feels that it is fraud that he is practising for a consideration of a hundred rupees a month. It does not please his innermost self. The moment he resigns he feels very peaceful. It is the moment of getting to read off from the mentality of subalternity. In his farewell speech at the Albert Missions College he says that he is seeking a great inner peace. And he cannot attain it unless he starts working into the world of children.