CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (1906 – 2001), one of the founding pillars of Indian Writing in English is an institution in himself. Born and brought up in a traditional South Indian family, Narayan is a true Indian both in spirit and thought. Much has been said about Narayan as an outstanding and unassailable story-teller. Volumes of research have been published on his eye-catching narrative style and his art of characterization. If Raja Rao is termed as a novelist of metaphysics, Narayan is often applauded as a painter of vivid Malgudi, a microcosm of Indian social milieu. He has always been claimed as a novelist par excellence in matters of social criticism of India. But little has been written on how Narayan incorporates the profoundest Indian thoughts, philosophies and spiritualism in general and theory of *Karma* in particular in his novels.

“To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots - both in religion and family. I have these things.” (1)

Born in a South Indian family of “the purest Brahmin stock” Narayan’s roots in religion and family were strengthened by his maternal grandmother who was instrumental in introducing him during his childhood to classical Indian and Tamil cultures, languages and literature, defining the traditional Brahmin values and ways of life. Every evening she made him recite the Tamil alphabet followed by Avvaiyar’s saying as well as a few Sanskrit *Slokas* praising Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning. Narayan’s traditional family and
social background thus initiated him in early stage of his life in the knowledge of Hindu philosophy, religion and culture. In one of his interviews with Susan E. Craft, Narayan remarks, “There are so many stories, so much symbolism, so much imagery. That’s where we should start.” (2)

R. K. Narayan has translated and published shortened prose versions of the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and a few Hindu mythical tales in *Gods, Demons and Others*.

A traditional South Indian Brahmin, Narayan used to start his day with meditation, a little bit of reading of the *Puranas* and recitation of *Gayatri Mantra*. His knowledge of Indian classical literature, philosophy, religion and ethics permeates his writing, but a simple man that he was, he does not unnecessarily burden his readers with discourses on abstract philosophy and metaphysics. He does not employ the genre of novel as a vehicle for propaganda for any social or political cause, nor does he pour too much philosophy and theory in his writing like his peers. Jayant K. Biswal opines:

“R. K. Narayan views life’s lapses not with any missionary benevolence or zeal but with the understanding and wisdom of an artist who acknowledges various compulsions, complexities of life behind his chimeric narrative modes. Thus, his comic mode shields his philosophy. Behind the narrative façade of his novels, Narayan attempts at a vision of life … a life of opposing dualities, of appearance and reality, beliefs and betrayals.” (3)

Narayan’s fiction includes a series of books about people and their interactions in an imagined town in South India. He is one of four leading
figures of early Indian literature in English, along with Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao. Narayan is credited with bringing Indian literature in English to the rest of the world, and is regarded as one of India's greatest English language novelists. Narayan broke through with the help of his mentor and friend, Graham Greene, who was instrumental in getting publishers for Narayan's first four books, including the semi-autobiographical trilogy of *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Narayan's works also include *The Financial Expert*, hailed as one of the most original works of 1951, and Sahitya Akademi Award winner *The Guide*, which was adapted for films in Hindi and English languages.

Narayan wrote his first novel, *Swami and Friends*, in 1935, after short, uninspiring stints as a teacher, an editorial assistant, and a newspaperman. In it, he invented the small south Indian city of Malgudi, a literary microcosm that critics later compared to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. More than a dozen novels and many short stories that followed were set in Malgudi. His writing style has been compared to that of Guy de Maupassant as they both have an ability to compress the narrative without losing out on elements of the story.

Narayan's second novel, *Bachelor of Arts* (1939), marked the beginning of his reputation in England, where the novelist Graham Greene was largely responsible for getting it published. Greene has called Narayan "the novelist I most admire in the English language." (4) His fourth novel, *The English Teacher*, published in 1945, was partly autobiographical, concerning a teacher's struggle to cope with the death of his wife. In 1953, Michigan State
University published it under the title *Grateful to Life and Death*, along with his novel *The Financial Expert*; they were Narayan's first books published in the United States.

Subsequent publications of his novels, especially *Mr. Sampath*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Guide*, *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, and *The Vendor of Sweets*, established Narayan's reputation in the West. Many critics consider *The Guide* (1958) to be Narayan's masterpiece. Told in a complex series of flashbacks, it concerns a tourist guide who seduces the wife of a client, prospers, and ends up in jail. The novel won India's highest literary honor, and it was adapted for the off-Broadway stage in 1968.

At least two of Narayan's novels, *Mr. Sampath* (1949) and *The Guide* (1958), were adapted for the movies. Narayan usually wrote for an hour or two a day, composing fast, often writing as many as 2,000 words and seldom correcting or rewriting.

Narayan's stories begin with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of a cross-section of Indian society, with characters of all classes. Gradually fate or chance, oversight or blunder, transforms mundane events to preposterous happenings. Unexpected disasters befall the hero as easily as unforeseen good fortune. The characters accept their fates with an equanimity that suggests the faith that things will somehow turn out happily, whatever their own motivations or actions. Progress, in the form of Western-imported goods and attitudes, combined with bureaucratic institutions, meets in Malgudi with long-held conventions, beliefs, and ways of doing things. The modern
world can never win a clear-cut victory because Malgudi accepts only what it wants, according to its own private logic.


In his 80s, Narayan continued to have books published. He returned to his original inspiration, his grandmother, with the 1994 book *Grandmother's Tale and Other Stories*, which *Publishers Weekly* called "an exemplary collection from one of India's most distinguished men of letters." (6) Donna Seaman of *Booklist* hailed the collection of short stories that spanned over 50 years of Narayan's writing as "an excellent sampling of his short fiction, generally considered his best work" from "one of the world's finest storytellers." (7) Narayan once noted: "Novels may bore me, but never people." (8)

In a writing career that spanned over sixty years, Narayan received many awards and honours. These include the A. C. Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award. He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian parliament.
Narayan’s fictional characters have their mooring in Malgudi. This town of Malgudi is a traditional one visited by Lord Rama, Laxmana, Sita, Hanuman and Goddess Parvati – the mythical Gods and Goddesses to Buddha, Sankara and Gandhi – from the mythical to the real. These Malgudians invite parallels with Chaucer’s Canterbury characters, Shakespeare’s fools and Hardy’s rustics. Narayan’s rustics and fools are controlled and governed by a value system that is enshrined in their culture, tradition, religion and philosophy though their understanding of these systems varies from person to person that accrues a high degree of complexity to these characters. According to P. S. Ramana, Narayan has studied a character first on the test of social order i.e. in the context of his community, set up and social environment, secondly, he studies a character in relation to himself. (9) These parallels in character analysis form the basis of Indian philosophy. The Malgudians achieve the equilibrium between their profession and philosophy and synthesize the concepts of Purusharthas and Ashrama Dharma (10) in their life. An analysis of their life reiterates the claims of their foregrounding in Indian moral and social value system.

Narayan’s comic vision illuminates numerous weighty themes – the place of woman in a traditional society, the moral limitations of a materialistic way of life and the consequences of flouting accepted codes. His fiction also incorporates the psychological and ethical implications of some Hindu concepts as ascetic purification, Yoga, renunciation, non-attachment, Maya and the cyclic progressions of life and death. Most importantly, Narayan projects the great Indian theory of Karma and he minutely represents various paths of achieving Moksha or self-realization in his novels. His fiction
combines different facets of life and experience. K. R. S. Iyenger rightly remarks:

“Narayan’s is the art of resolved and conscientious exploration
… he would, if he could, explore the inner countries of the
mind, heart and soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the
tragic in the prosaic.” (11)

Narayan believes in all rituals, ethos and abstract philosophies. No wonder his fiction reflects his inherent knowledge of Indian philosophy, classical literature, religion and ethics. Except for the use of English language, his novels are Indo-centric as opposed to Eurocentric that imbibes the quintessence of Indian philosophy. Shanta Krishnaswamy regards Narayan a great collector of old concepts, a sammler of order, and of tradition. (12) R. M. Verma also points out that the author’s commonplace creations seek a righteous path in the travails of their existence which is pinpointed in the totality of Indian living – an amalgam of past and present, tradition and modernity. (13) V. S. Naipaul also holds the similar view and remarks:

“Narayan’s novels are less purely social comedies I had once
taken them to be than religious books, at times religious fables,
and intensively Hindu.” (14)

Being an unassuming and unpretentious artist, Narayan does not unnecessarily burden his readers with pedantic discourses on abstract philosophy or metaphysics. Novel for Narayan is not a means of social or political propaganda, nor does he treat it as a vehicle for filtering in philosophy into the text like Raja Rao, but his fictional works are simplistic but realistic projection of life.
Narayan’s presentation of characters and their relationships with one another achieve a philosophic overtone. He presents the characters in the light of the most contemplated universal theory of Karma as devised by The Bhagwad Gita, a Hindu epic. Almost all Narayan’s characters demonstrate the growing pains arising from the dissatisfaction with their mundane lives. De facto, this dissatisfaction comes in their process of achieving self-realization. Narayan’s characters achieve a synthesis of flesh and spirit through the philosophic interpretation of their own mundane activities. Kantak rightly observes:

“These Malgudi men and women within their circumscribed lives, yet manage to express, the irrepressible Joie-de-vivre which distinguishes them. They think and live differently, once they attain their synthesis of flesh and spirit.” (15)

Almost all Narayan’s principle characters experience loneliness and alienation. This loneliness and alienation comes in their lives because they are dissatisfied with their lives. However, the period which they spend in loneliness and alienation is fruitful. The long weary nights which Swami spends in the forest enables him to appreciate and understand the love and affection of his parents. In the same way, Marco and Rosie in The Guide and Krishnan and Sushila in The English Teacher suffer from separation and loneliness which teach them to face the bitter truths of life. Raju, the guide denounces the material life and turns spiritual and introspective during his lonely hours in the jail. Raja, the tiger too turns out a Sanyasi as he is tamed and separated from his wild manners of living and thinking. Thus, Narayan has projected the theme of separation in his novels in order to incorporate the
philosophic vision of India. This vision has been preached by most of the Indian scriptures through the theory of self-realization.

Moreover, Narayan strongly believes in the life which is lived in correlation with tradition and philosophy and deviation from it brings suffering and dissatisfaction. The human relationships presented by Narayan in his novels have originated from Indian tradition and philosophy. The relationship between the father and the son – for example, Chandran and his father in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Swami and his father in *Swami and Friends*, Margayya and Balu in *The Financial Expert*, Gagan and Mali in *The Vendor of Sweets* and Gopu and Tim in *The World of Nagaraj* do not have harmony and peace because the son in these relationships do not show any sense of respect and reverence to his tradition.

In the same way, the severing of relationship and emotional trauma is found in husband and wife relationship in Narayan’s novels. The relationship between Marco and Rosie in *The Guide* is not based on traditional philosophic values as devised by Manu in *Manu Smriti* – devotion, submission, mutual respect and proper understanding. This couple does not share this kind of bond and therefore, their relationship does not become everlasting. On the contrary to this, the relationship between Krishnan and Sushila in *The English Teacher* touches the height of sublimity because they share a strong bondage of family values. The relationship between Srinivas and Sampath in *Mr. Sampath*, Margayya and Dr. Pal in *The Financial Expert* and Nataraj and Vasu in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* does not run in proper manner and there is upheaval in their lives. Thus, the role of traditional values and philosophical touch to human relationship has been emphasized by Narayan in his novels.
In Narayan’s presentation of characters, we find a general pattern as K. R. S. Iyenger observes:

“There is generally a flight, an uprooting, a disturbance of order
followed by a return, a renewal, a restoration to normalcy.” (16)

Narayan presents the characters passing through a period of struggle and transition but towards the end they attain a new vitality which provides them with a new interpretation of ordinary situations. The normalcy in the lives of Vasu, Margayya, Jagan, Raju and Raja comes, only because of their submission to traditional values and self-realization.

Narayan has also presented the great theory of order and disorder in his novels. Arjuna in the Indian epic The Bhagwad Gita encounters a great conflict on the battle field and disorder hovers his life which is brought to normalcy by Lord Krishna through his ever lively preaching of the theory of Karma. One finds the ‘order-disorder’ pattern on a large scale in Narayan’s novels. In his presentation of human relationship between two human beings, there is order in the beginning, but this order is not lasting. It gets disordered when his characters come in conflict with other characters under some unexpected situations and circumstances. About this pattern, R. A. Singh rightly remarks:

“The order-disorder pattern in R. K. Narayan’s fiction could be understood better in terms of the Hegelian dialectic where order attained at the end is qualitatively different from the initial order which generates discontent in the protagonist.” (17)

Narayan applies this pattern in almost all his novels. The ‘order-disorder’ pattern is found the relationship between Swami and his father, between Chandran and his father, between Jagan and Mali, Gopu and Tim
have order and peace in the beginning, but this order does not remain for a long time. Their relationships do not attain any appropriate dimension because their motives clash with each other and their outlooks and attitudes differ from each other. Similarly, there is order in the beginning in the relationship between Srinivas and Mr. Sampath, Margayya and Dr. Pal, Raju and his mother and Vasu and Nataraj. But their relationships are disordered when they realize the transitoriness of human relationship based on selfishness and opposite motives. But at the end they attain the life full of spiritual and mental peace as they learn a lesson that human and the social values preached by the Indian philosophy are mandatory for any human being to achieve salvation and self-realization. It is these values that help one to maintain his/her equilibrium in times of disorder, clash of motives and conflict.

R. K. Narayan’s characters with a fore-grounding in the cultural life of their society have deeply absorbed and assumed philosophical ways of life. Although they cherish the ancient values and retain the traditional ways of life, yet they do not hesitate in bringing about a change, adopting and adapting to the modern ways of life. Narayan deals with Indian philosophy, but he does not preach in an aphoristic way, on the contrary, the dull, dry and serious material of Indian thought is made comprehensive and contemporary. In his novels Mr. Sampath, The Man Eater of Malgudi and The World of Nagaraj the philosophy of the protagonists and other characters is largely derived from the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics and the Bhagvad Gita. This philosophy is a part of their cultural heritage and ancestry which varies according to the familial or social conditions of these characters.
Narayan’s characters have a philosophic outlook towards life. Philosophy for them is not an objective reality but a way of life. Narayan’s characters can be categorized into three distinct groups on the basis of their philosophical perspectives and social activities. Firstly there are the chief protagonists with a specific philosophical vision in life. Srinivas in Mr. Sampath and Nataraj in The Man Eater of Malgudi and Nagaraj in The World of Nagaraj are philosophers in their own right who expound, protect and promote the value system that is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical thought. Secondly, there are those like Vasu in The Man Eater of Malgudi and Sampath in Mr. Sampath who offer a resistance to the unity and harmony of the Malgudian world which is a microcosm of the Indian society. Lastly, Narayan introduces in his novels a class of people who offer a critique of Indian philosophy and thought, in their own way. They are ordinary people engaged in the mundane activities and their attitude to life, circumstances and fate bring about the divergent interpretations and analysis of Indian philosophy.

Narayan’s characters adhere to or violate the ethical and moral system which is the major component of Indian philosophy and thought. His philosophical characters subscribe to the moral and ethical dictates and codes laid down in Manu Smriti. Srinivas and Nataraj are moralists who adhere to the values of the Indian society. The characters who violate the peace and harmony of the Malgudian world are immoral, unethical and they are eventually punished. Mr. Sampath ends up a forlorn person while Vasu precipitates his end in a mysterious manner. The critiques of philosophy simultaneously pursue their own ethics.
Narayan's fiction reiterates the doctrine of *Karma* (action) in the Indian philosophical systems. The innate trust in life and the capacity of its renewal in the face of a threat of its existence is the central principle of his fiction. The Indian philosophy regards this life which functions in a cyclical order subjected to various ups and downs as medium of true self-realization. Narayan has presented the theory of *Karma* in some of his novels. His novels *The English Teacher*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Financial Expert* discuss the theory of *Karma* and the cyclic vision of R. K. Narayan. It is averred that the occult and esoteric experiences in *The English Teacher* described by Narayan explores the cycle of life and death besides the loneliness of human existence. *The Vendor of Sweets*, is also a sojourn into the theme of man's quest for identity and self-renewal. The fifty five year old Jagan, a fervent disciple of Gandhi and a devotee of the *Bhagvad Gita* explores the meaning, and mystery of life cycle through Indian philosophy. The chain of events in the life of Margayya in *The Financial Expert* depicts a cyclic order. The novels explore the theory of *Artha* and *Kama* in a truly Indian sense. It is a classic exposition of the Hindu philosophy of equilibrium where man survives the external shocks of adversity positively and peacefully. Narayan’s characters reinforce and reassert their faith in Indian culture, history, religion, ethics and philosophy withstanding the shock of an alien culture. Narayan asserts the fact that an individual can transcend the boundaries of *Karma*, fate and the cycle of this life and death if he observes the dictates and dictum of Indian *Shashtras*. Like Narayan, Raja Rao has also asserted these philosophical concepts in his fiction, but his presentation is more metaphysical and abstract.
The influence and impact of Gandhi’s ideology in contemporary Indian society in general and on literatures in particular can not be undermined. Gandhian philosophy and ideology has invariably motivated and invigorated the contemporary Indian writers and a huge corpus of contemporary Indian writing is fore-grounded on Gandhism. The works of the leading contemporary Indian writers in English, namely, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya and R. K. Narayan demonstrated the Gandhian impact in their writings. Apart from these luminaries, K. A. Abbas’ Inquilab, Nagarajan’s The Chronicals of Kedaram, K. R. Venkataramani’s Kandan, The Patriot describe at length the influence of Gandhi on the contemporary social and political scene.

Narayan in his characteristic comical and subtle manner prefers to write novels primarily focusing on day-to-day life of an average Malgudian in the imaginary town of Malgudi. The hallmark of his writing is that he has successfully fused his personal philosophy in his literary works. Though apparently simple in content, Narayan’s fiction is distinctive for its fusion of the comic with the serious. Unlike the novels of his contemporaries Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, Narayan does not directly promote the Gandhian philosophy. Narayan’s treatment of the Gandhian philosophy in his fiction is distinctly different, his works manifest the multifarious facets of Gandhism. His protagonists and characters rooted and nurtured in the Indian ethics and philosophy are people in quest of truth who embody the greatest virtues of life and they are Gandhians in their own particular manner. When they are disillusioned, they epitomize the disillusionment of the masses who failed to
comprehend and assimilate the teachings of Gandhi to the danger of trivialization of Gandhism.

Narayan has knitted the Gandhian philosophy in the theme and plot of his novels. His protagonists propagate the Gandhian views and advocate Gandhian philosophy as way of life. The Gandhian philosophy is reflected very effectively in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The English Teacher*. Narayan delineates the Gandhian stream of consciousness that awakens the inner sensibility of both the characters and readers. Sriram in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* and Krishnan in *The English Teacher* finally evolve as true Gandhians. The class of pseudo-Gandhian is comically caricatured and satirized in Narayan’s fiction. Swaminathan and Chandran in *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Arts* respectively share the pre-independence views of an average middle class Indian. Swaminathan, a participant in Gandhian movement, is more aggressive and outspoken in his adherence to Gandhian philosophy, but Chandran’s approach, on the contrary, is moderate and reasonable. In *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, the theme of non-violence is randomly contrasted with the character of Vasu and the same theme is epitomized through the activities of the wild beast, tiger in *A Tiger for Malgudi* who ultimately subscribes to the Gandhian way of life under the guidance of his master who is again a devotee of Gandhi.

Narayan’s fiction corroborates with the eternal view of self – realization and *Moksha* as well as the contents of Indian philosophy. Moreover, his birth and upbringing in a traditional Brahmin family further substantiates this indelible mark of Hinduism on his personality and writing. *The Bhagvad Gita*
and its *Karma* philosophy regard self – realization or enlightenment as the ultimate goal in a man’s life, although the methods for the attainment of this goal may vary from man to man. Soul i.e. *Atman* acquires unanimity with the Supreme Soul or Almighty who is *Paramatma* or God. *Moksha* is a state of moral and intellectual perfection transcending the distinction between good and evil, between doubt and faith, between being and non-being. This goal is attainable in present life as per the teachings, sayings of the Upanishads and *Jivan Mukti* or liberation In the end, when the individual who has reached this stage, dissociates himself from physical accomplishments, he becomes *Brahman* itself; that is final release or *Videha – Mukti*.

Narayan has very artistically interwoven various thoughts of *The Bhagwad Gita* in his novels. He has presented the theory of renunciation, and liberation or *Moksha* in his two novels, *The Guide* and *A Tiger for Malgudi*. Raju, the tourist guide is initially entrapped in the illusory world when the materialistic *Charvaka* philosophy guides and governs his life. He commits the crime of forging the signature of Rosie and is accordingly punished and sent to the prison. His foul deeds pay him. He receives his ill fate as per his evil *Karma*. But landed into the prison life, he finds time for his moral and social transgression. The prison accrues to him an ideal opportunity to journey into the innermost regions of his soul and shake off his material and social illusions. Thereafter, evolution in the character of Raju is a ceaseless and ongoing process.

If *The Guide* is the spiritual odyssey of a man, *A Tiger for Malgudi* on the contrary presents an insight into the animal world. Narayan has experimented here with the popular theme of transformation in a beast. The
narrator's choice for the most powerful animal from the animal kingdom as the chief protagonist in the novel is full of inferences and hidden meaning. Narayan is in fact exploring as well as exposing human weaknesses, follies and foibles in both man and beast. At the lowest level of physical existence Raju and Raja share the *Tamasik Gunas* when the pursuit of *Kama* and *Artha* is their topmost priority in life.

The life of the tiger Raja offers a close parallel to the circle of human engagement in *Sansara*. Both man and beast require the guidance of a worthy *Guru* to attain liberation from *Sansara*. The tiger Raja under the guidance of the Swami attains knowledge. His entry into the *Vanaprastha Ashrama* is devised by Swami. Raja’s departure to the zoo is symbolic of a new *janma* or life corresponding to the Indian philosophical concept of *Punarjanma* or reincarnation. Raju, the human attains knowledge by an exploration of the self and achieves sainthood. He too acquires entirely anew attire inwardly and outwardly. Thus, Raju also enters into his new *janma* or life.

The present study undertakes to examine the novels of R. K. Narayan in the context of Indian philosophy, religion and ethics in general and theory of *Karma*, *Moksha* the theory of cycle of life and death in particular. An attempt has also been made to observe Narayan’s characters in the light of four *Ashramas* (*Bramhacharyashrama*, *Grihasthashrama*, *Vanaprasthashrama* and *Sanyasthashrama*) and four ideals (*Artha*, *Kama*, *Dharma* and *Moksha*) as well as duties of *Purusha* or man as devised by Manu in *Manu Smriti*. 
REFERENCES


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