Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

The novel, according to Philippe Sollers, is the way in which society talks to itself. Contemporary critical theory has placed the study of fictional works in a broader perspective attempting to answer the *whats* and *hows* of its organization, structure and development as a literary genre. The present study attempts to apply the theoretical concepts of Bakhtin on some selected works of R.K. Narayan.

The writings of Bakhtin go back to the 1920s and 1930s, but he remained unknown to the world until translations in the 1970s brought him to focus. Since then, his ideas, specially polyphony, dialogism and the carnival have proved attractive to critics of different persuasions ranging from Marxists, feminists, to traditional humanists. The reason for such a fascination may be hidden in Bakhtin’s radical understanding of relativization of truth, his notion of hidden polemic in all speech, his notion of addressivity, which promotes human connection, and the overall moral implication of freedom. His habitual avoidance of any reductionism shows his concern for the dangers of knowledge both inside or outside a text. He conceives knowledge as dialogic, which
addresses rather than defines. This concern for openness or dialogism can be traced back even to his early aesthetic theories which indicate a deep conviction that an aesthetic event can take place only when there are two participants present, and that it presupposes two non-coinciding consciousnesses. This perception later on was developed to an understanding that a fictional work is primarily dialogic and multi-voiced. Bakhtin stresses not the way that texts reflect society or class interests, but rather the way language disrupts authority and liberates alternative voices.

Bakhtin’s theoretical position is clearly anti-Stalinist and against all kinds of oppression. To him any kind of human relationship cannot be viewed in terms of the active and the passive. It may be asserted that in a dominant and subordinate relationship, the passive agent not only accepts anything as fate accompli, but also suppresses his/her inner voice, which silently cries for freedom and space. It was quite natural for Bakhtin to be apprehensive of the diminution of the human soul or deprivation of human freedom. Verbal signs are the arena of continuous class struggle: the ruling class will always try to narrow the meaning of words and make social signs ‘uni-accentual’. However, Bakhtin
underlines the importance of 'heteroglossia' as the foundation of 'multi-
accentuality' of linguistic signs in social discourse that governs the
production of meaning in all discourses. It asserts the way contexts
define the meaning of utterances, which are heteroglot in so far as they
put in play a multiplicity of social voices and their individual
expressions. A single voice may give the impression of unity and
closure, but the utterance is constantly producing a plentitude of
meanings, which stem from social interaction.

Bakhtin had lived through the oppressions of the Czars, and also
the gloomy years of Stalin's dictatorship. He was even arrested and
lived in exile for six years. So, the authorial vision which he almost
valorizes in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" cannot be taken as
final, as there seem to be an inner tension in the essay itself. Pam Morris
points out that this tension is evident when Bakhtin links the authority
of authorial knowledge with death. Morris quotes:

Artistic vision presents us with the whole hero, measured
in full and added up in every detail; there must be no
secrets for us in the hero in respect to meaning ... From the
very outset, we must experience all of him, deal with the
whole of him: in respect to meaning, he must be dead for
us, formally dead. (Quoted in Morris, 1994:7)
This authorial vision is dismissed by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, where he criticizes Tolstoy’s monologic (authorial narration) style. Authorial knowledge leads to a dead end. To Bakhtin, the overwhelming question that compels to be asked is, is not life more mysterious, more ambivalent and full of unanswered questions and quest for meaning? Is not the meaning of myself always yet to be completed? Is not there more attraction towards the sense of unfinalizability of self than da Vinci’s perfect knowledge of human anatomy?

His search for answers to these questions led Bakhtin to understand the complexity that exists in relationships between the author and his characters in a narrative. It is, as he finds, more complex in the dynamics of the social than in love, which is considered to be the ideal form of relationship. So he finds for himself that the active giver (author) and the passive recipient (hero) of his “*Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*” become two active agents interacting with each other in a complex manner. Language becomes the focus of Bakhtin’s thought as he finds it to be the sensitive register of the complex power relations in a society. He finds a strong flavour in the polemic and addressivity of
the language in a novel. This leads him to his narrative theory, which he calls ‘dialogic’ – meaning that each utterance is addressed to someone, never uttered without consciousness of a relationship between the speaker and the addressee. In this, the play of power and hierarchy are also taken into account. Bakhtin writes in “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art” that the basic stylistic tone of utterance is ... determined above all by who is talked about and what his relation is to the speaker – whether he is higher or lower than or equal to him on the scale of social hierarchy.

Bakhtin follows an overtly Marxist approach with a significant departure from its ideological orthodoxy. He embeds his thesis in a perspective that is drawn from Hegelian ‘humanism’ and Lukacs’s concept of “social realism”. In making language the central concern of his study, Bakhtin has attempted the closest approximation to scientificness of language in the study of ideology and creativity. He criticizes two current approaches to the understanding of literature – the Formalist attempt at objectivity and the alternate approach of identifying creativity with subjective psychology that fails to understand that verbal art is intrinsically sociological. The social with or without
ideological considerations is crucial for the verbal art as it originates in society and uses its resources.

An assessment of Bakhtin’s theory on the carnival needs a prior evaluation of the concept of the polyphonic novel. We should start our discussion with Bakhtin’s praise of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin uses a new term ‘polyphony’ to describe Dostoevsky’s highly innovative narrative form that shows his acute awareness of the multi-voicedness of all discourse. In Dostoevsky’s novels, the author’s voice is only one among many and the characters are allowed free speech. This, he says, is lacking in Tolstoy where the over-riding authorial voice sounds the loudest. Bakhtin identifies such polyphony as a special property of the novel and traces it back to its carnivalistic sources in classical, medieval and Renascence cultures.

Bakhtin traces the origin of the many-voiced 20th century novel to the carnival tradition in folk culture. The rich tradition of serio-comic, dialogic, satiric literature is found in Socratic dialogues, Menippian satire, medieval mystery plays, and in the works of Boccaccio, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Voltaire, Balzac and Hugo. This carnivalized anti-tradition appears most significantly in the novel. The public ritual
of carnival, especially the ritual of crowning and de-crowning of a mock king inverts values in order to question them. Often through the medium of the grotesque, the people of a community express both their sense of being victims of power and their own power to subvert authority. In a similar manner, the polyphonic novel calls closed meaning into question. Carnival and the novel make power relative by addressing it instead of defining it.

The strong feeling that pervades us while we discuss Bakhtin’s perception of the novel and his theory of carnivalization is his deep longing for the freedom of the human soul. His theory is more appealing, as it is more generative than that of the structuralists who focus on the *langue* – or the system of any language. The Russian Formalists studied folk tales as structural units that together contained a limited number of types of characters and actions. If this can be called the *langue* (the system), then, the individual tale is a *parole* (the specific application of *langue*). Bakhtin’s idea of the novel breaks all literary conventions. M. Holquist explains that the ‘novel’ is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system. Unlike poetry
or drama, the novel holds immense scope and possibilities for the free play of social speech, thereby inviting the whole gamut of life into its sphere. This democratization of expression is further initiated by Bakhtin's concept of the carnival. Bakhtin's concept of the carnival should be understood in the context of the age-old folk-culture, which had been so rich and active in the past, which is still there camouflaged in modern society, and which will always be there as long as the human community remains essentially social and cosmic. The keynote to this age-old folk-culture is carnival laughter or the unofficial laughter, which is actually a certain way of conceiving the world. It is an all-embracing and broadminded world-view, which is never pedagogic, humourless or biased. It has the strength to take the incongruous world in its stride, fearlessly laughing away the strictures and threatenings of the official value-system. It negotiates with a truth that lurks in the grotesque sphere of the world. As against the upward movement of the official value-system, grotesque realism moves downward, respecting earth's gravity. By way of degradation, the grotesque world brings all its subjects down to earth, while materializing them and turning them to flesh. This grotesque existence is ambivalent, as it signifies a world that dies to be
born, which devours, but at the same time gets devoured. In its spheres, binaries like death and birth, evil and good are not isolated phenomena, but are the two faces of a single truth. This acceptance of ambivalence in truth creates healthy positivism, which is free from the effects of isolation and egocentricity of the modern world.

In the perspective of Bakhtin’s theory, a study of the novels of R.K. Narayan proves enlightening. The novels selected for this study exemplify Bakhtin’s theories on the polyphonic novel and especially his radical view about the carnivalized anti-tradition.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan was born in 1906 in his grandmother’s house in Madras, India, and grew up in Madras, although his father was a headmaster of a state-run school in the old Mysore State. Narayan did not distinguish himself as a student, but passion for literature was unmistakable. He read eclectically and contributed items on meetings and murders to a Madras newspaper, which brought him a little income. His first novel Swami and Friends (1935) was rejected by several publishers before it came to the attention of the English novelist Graham Greene, who found a publisher for it, as he did for his The Bachelor of Arts (1937) and The Darkroom (1938). Narayan married a
young woman of his own choice, against family traditions and astrological warnings, and his wife died of typhoid in 1939. After a long period of literary stasis Narayan wrote the intensely autobiographical novel *The English Teacher* (1945; republished in the USA as *Grateful to Life and Death*, 1953). Narayan’s succeeding works do not delve into his persona, though his writing gets richer, more broad-based and complex. Along with fourteen Malgudi-novels, Narayan wrote numerous short stories, critical essays, travelogues, etc. Narayan’s novels have been translated into many foreign languages. In India, he won the Sahitya Akademi Award (in 1960, for *The Guide*) and the Padma Bhusan (1964) and was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament. The British Royal Society of Literature awarded Narayan the A.C. Benson Medal and he received the English Speaking Union Book Award from USA and was made a Fellow of the prestigious American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1982), the only Indian writer to be so honoured.

Narayan’s tolerance and all-embracing consciousness engenders the comic mode, which, according to C.D. Narasimhaiah, is equivalent to the tragic in his evocation of mediocrity. According to Graham Greene, sadness and humour go hand-in-hand in Narayan’s novels. This ambivalence is possible as the writer uses a polyphonic style, which renders meaning as unfinalizable. The openness of meaning is what the protagonist’s consciousness manifests, for his consciousness is dialogically placed with other equally valid consciousnesses, thus questioning the hero’s ideological position and preventing any rounding-up of his character. This very reason thwarts any attempt at compartmentalization of Narayan’s novels, leaving the readers puzzled if they are looking for well-constructed plots and rounded characters. One very interesting example in this context is Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The novel is often marked out by readers and critics as a Gandhi-novel. But throughout the novel, what we find is Narayan’s placing of the image of Gandhi among diverse and contradictory positions. The image of Gandhi in the narrative enters into various relationships with other positions, which leaves the meaning/image of Gandhi open. The relativization of Gandhian principles destroys the
myth, bringing to surface questions that lurk between lines, and often threaten to unsettle our complacent idea about the people of India in relation to Gandhi. Did the people of India understand Gandhi and his non-violence? We find in Waiting the people of Malgudi joining with equal enthusiasm the Gandhi-rallies as well as the Loyalists’ meetings. They hardly realize how opposed are the two meetings in principle. The image of Gandhi is polemicized in other novels too. In Swami and Friends the occasional demonstrations against the British government is spasmodic, with children boycotting their classes, burning their foreign clothes and breaking the glass-windows of their schools. Such chaos gives Swami, a little boy, the opportunity to bunk his classes. He burns his khadi cap in the spree of destroying foreign goods. Swami is a little boy, but his confusion seems to reflect all other agitators, including adults. All of them are caught up in the excitement, which the very name of Gandhi evoked, but their true perception of Gandhi remains questionable. Gandhi in Narayan’s novels is not a monologic figure, but is a dispersed signifier who brings into focus the polyphonic reality of India’s freedom struggle that manifests a structureless paradigm of a carnival. According to Bakhtin, the polyphonic world is like the church,
which is a communion of unmerged spirits – the meeting place of the sinner and the righteous, the repentant and the unrepentant, the saved and the damned. The dialogism in a polyphonic novel provides a scope for an unbiased and democratic exploration of the mystery of life.

Narayan’s dialogic world-view has the elasticity to accept and expose the ambivalence of life, and thus initiates the depiction of life not as a harmonious unity but as a battleground of diverse and contradictory tendencies and pursuits. Hence Narayan’s stories never achieve the expected denouement that would satisfy our expectations. However, they remain open ended and ambivalent. As Graham Greene points out, in the very first novel of Narayan, *Swami*, the little boy Swami at the end watches his dear friend Rajam with whom he had needlessly quarrelled, vanish into the vast unknown spaces of India. It is a reality as stark as death, especially to a sensitive little boy, as it leaves no promise or hope for the future reunion. It is a deceptively powerful ending, as it emits the flavour of the stark reality exposed in the irrational and accidental quality of human life. Thus, while Rajam’s train shows its tail light to the gaping little Swami, the reader too has to gape in wonder at the suddenness and irrationality of the ending.
Interestingly, in *The Darkroom* Savitri’s homecoming creates a similar situation of deferred finality like the departure of Rajam from Malgudi. In both cases, the expectation of poetic justice is left unrequited. Savitri is a victim of the social situation in which a married lady is dependent on her husband and has no choice other than accepting his economic dominance. For Savitri it is an existential crisis – either she does not surrender and commits suicide, or is forced to return. Her disappearance would have in a sense pampered the sentiment of the reader, but Savitri does the opposite – she succumbs to her fate in life. Narayan, we find, is not looking at any extraordinary possibility of making her a tragic figure. The lack of sentimentality in dealing with her character makes her situation more unbearable. The novel remains an open question – yet to be solved.

Narayan’s polyphonic style creates characters, who are unpredictable, unfinished, and lack the integrated givenness of their personality, while moving beyond the dialectical closures. In Narayan’s world there is no hero and there is no villain; often the concept of hero and villain fuse and overlap. The characters thus do not make laudable
claims of morality, ethics or ideology except following their mundane materialistic needs and bodily drives.

As against the pulls of ideology that rejects the earthly and the material and centralizes human existence towards its value-system, the downward thrust of grotesque realism affirms the material life of the body and its needs. This grotesque bodily life is ambivalent in nature, as it defies the moral, ethical binaries created by the official world. This ambivalence permeates Narayan’s characters and renders them unpredictable and unfinished. Raju of *The Guide* is neither a hero nor a villain, but his character is constituted in the dialectics of virtue and falsehood integrating both the hero and a villain in him. His love for Rosie drives him to leave his dear mother, but at the same time he uses Rosie’s talent to mint money. In fact, it is quite difficult for the reader to thrust a final comment on the characters created by Narayan. How would one define, for example, the *Financial Expert*? Margaya is a financial wizard, who piles up money with feverish zeal. His lust for money surprisingly, is not for the promotion of personal comfort, but to appease his avarice. His money-minting tendencies are self-denying and self-destructive, for he ruins his health in the process.
In most of Narayan’s novels, the hero is actually the anti-hero, a person very common, wayward, selfish and middle class, pursuing some material gain. The very image of this hero inverts the conventional image of the hero, as he moves between the two poles of buffoonery and the tragic. The closed meaning of the hero is thus brought to question. Narayan’s heroes may be contrasted with the heroes of Tagore’s novels, who are intellectual elites on a quest for self-identity and self-discovery. One may look for Tagore’s own quest through his characters. Tagore is trying to establish the identity of balanced, modern and exemplary Indians standing between the radicals of the Derozio school and the reactionaries. On the other hand, Narayan’s grotesque characters are let free in a domain where questions of identity and self-consciousness are not ideologically underpinned; they are simply floaters, floating according to the movement of the current, accepting everything either Western or Indian in their own stride.

The setting in most novels of Narayan is also carnivalesque in its market place-like atmosphere. The narrative space in Narayan’s works is never a confined place; it has an openness that includes courtyards, stations or taxi stands, where numerous funny faces appear and
disappear, a veritable bazaar, giving the overall impression of life as a generative process. Births, marriages and deaths are casually thrown in without any attempt to sentimentalize them. Narayan never explores the dark layers of human psyche. Here, whatever happens to the individual is not created by that individual's psychological complexities, but by society and the individual's relation to it. Thus the crowd crowns the clown as the king and again decrows him without remorse or a sense of victory. In Narayan's world nobody is a victor or a victim. Here, for good or bad, power is constantly relativized. Savitri's retreat to the darkroom is pathetically ineffective in moving her husband. Her sentiments turn funny and clownish, but to show that she is supreme in the house she dominates at her servants in an attempt to reinvent her power that she actually does not enjoy. In *The Guide* Raju's relation to the crowd is double-voiced; they inspire him and turn him into a loquacious character, for he holds his power over them as a tourist-guide, a teacher in the jail and as the Swami on the banks of Sarayu. The crowd too has its inbuilt force of subversion and Raju is decrowns by them; he succumbs to the will-power of the mass and literally fasts to death.
Perhaps, Narayan’s grotesque presentation of Malgudi renders the hitherto fragmentary picture of India true and complete. Narayan projects the ‘other India’ – the villages, small towns, where most of the people live – which may have been hidden behind the façade of ‘great India’ never considered important to writers and historians. Thus cultural signs like ‘spirituality’, ‘harmony’, ‘self-sacrifice’, ‘self-effacement’, propagated by the official world are constantly being polemicized by the faceless people – the cunning shopkeepers, exploiting priests, loquacious railway guides, greedy film makers, who swarm Narayan’s novels. Vasu in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is a perfect example. Vasu held no other relation worth consideration beyond the consideration of money. He is a talented artist, but in his blunt commercialism he explodes the previous myth of the artist as a man of high mental aspirations. Similarly, Mr. Sampath’s uncritical pursuit of the capitalist impulse in a self-righteous manner turned him unpredictable and unredeemable. Mr. Sampath, an attractive character, versatile and helpful, leaves his own peaceful place in the press for the glamour-world of film-making, which ultimate leads him nowhere. With all his respect for Gandhian spiritualism, Tagore’s call for self-
purification and the dreams of the socialist thinkers of the time, Narayan could not help perceiving the paradoxes and ironies that haunted the middle-class of India. Supported by his grotesque characters and multi-voiced novels, Narayan initiated a greater freedom and clarity of expression. The presence of the overwhelming faceless crowd and their multi-voiced representation brings Narayan’s works closer to Bakhtin’s understanding of polyphony and carnival.

The most powerful expression of reality that exists outside the domain of the grim official world, according to Bakhtin, is the world of the carnival with the unadulterated laughter and frolic. We hear this fearless festive laughter in the novels of Narayan. It is not the deriding expression of the individual against a rival, as we find in the satire. Universal in scope, this carnival laughter is directed towards the funny incongruities of mankind in general. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect and its gay relativity. The pathetic display of self-importance of Raju before his simple, good natured mother and the illiterate taxi driver, Sriram’s muddling up of Gandhi’s speech on human love with his own pangs of adolescent infatuation, or the sweet-vendor’s funny self-deceptive activities like stealing his own money break through all
pretences of self-importance that the *homo sapiens* claim to enjoy. The language of laughter exposes the clown in the garb of the king. It is healthy, as it humbles as well as strengthens humankind to face the stark reality about itself and the world.

Narayan in a sense is a contemporary of Bakhtin, and like him lived in a troubled world. To capture this world in fictional narrative, he has chosen that his characters speak instead of the author. Both Bakhtin and Narayan express their longing for the freedom of the human soul – Bakhtin through his appreciation of the carnival spirit and Narayan through his multi-voiced novels, where grotesque characters and events subtly convey bitter truths about individuals and society.

The theoretical insights of Bakhtin, it is hypothesized, will bring in a different perspective in the reading of R.K. Narayan’s works. Following this position and in the light of the above discussion, the present work is organized into the following chapters:

1. Introduction.


6. Conclusion.

WORK CITED