CHAPTER - 1

Introduction

Biography and Background
R.K. Narayan
CHAPTER - I

BIOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

R.K. Narayan is the most widely read Indian writer writing in English. He is among the great Indian novelists who used English as medium of their writing. The three great Indian novelists Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan are known as ‘trio’ among the fiction writers of India. R.K. Narayan’s writing span ranges from the declining days of the British raj to the present. During this period, he has written over a dozen novels and he has rendered in contemporary English the great Indian Epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. During this period he has also published five collections of short stories, two collections of reportage and personal essays, some travel books and a memoir. He also wrote many articles for newspapers, journals and magazines. His writing style is quite different from his contemporary writers – Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Balachandra Rajan, etc. He established himself his own literary style as Dickens, Hardy, Auden and Scott did. He lived in his own romantic world, the world of Malgudi. He used English as his medium and established himself as a great figure in the history of Indo-Anglian Literature.

Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Rashipuram, a small-rural town near Salem in Western Tamil Nadu. His father was R.V. Krishnaswami Iyer, the second child of Rashipuram Venkatarama Iyer and his mother was Gnanambal, the second daughter of Narayanaswami Iyer and his wife Parvathi known as Amman who took a very important role in Narayan’s life. Traditionally, the name of the town or village of paternal family origin
is to be put initially to denote Southern Indian names and the bearer’s father’s name comes as we find in the full name of Narayan as Rashipuram Krishnaswami Narayan.

It was at the age of two that Narayan took up residence in Madras with his grandmother. It was also from his grandmother that Narayan got his first education. In his autobiography Narayan remembers his grandmother Ammaní’s dissatisfaction with his school teachers. Every evening, after his gardening she would place an easy chair in the garden for herself and a stool beside it for her grandson. She would fix up a lamp and had attempted to supplement with her coaching the inadequate education Narayan got in the school. Multiplication tables up to twelve had to be recited every day and all the thirty letters of Tamil alphabet, a few Sanskrit slokas in praise of Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning had also to be repeated. Ammaní also taught him a few classical melodies whose Raga was to be quickly identified by the young child. When drowsiness comes within a few minutes of starting the lesson, Ammaní, with a bowl of water at hand is ready to dabble his eyes with cold water to keep him awake. In *My Days*,¹ her strictness and passion to teach is conveyed as follows:

“Grandmotherhood was a wrong vocation for her; she ought to have been a school inspectress”¹.

It was in 1912 that Narayan began his schooling at E.L.M. Fabricius Lutheran Mission School on Purasawalkam High Road. He would remain in that school from the kindergarten class to the completion of the third form, the final middle school year. Next, he went to the C.R.C. High School,

"an endowed school whose benefactor’s name was too lengthy and was abbreviated for practical reasons." After the C.R.C. Narayan was admitted to the Christian College High School by his uncle Seshachalam using his influence as an old student. It was at the end of the first term that Narayan was sent off to Mysore where his father was transferred as the Headmaster of Mahraja’s Collegiate High School and Narayan would complete his schooling in an institution where one’s father was the head. One phase of his life as a man of Madras was ended and he became a Mysorean. In My Days, Narayan narrates what he felt when he left Madras:

“At first, naturally, I missed the life at Madras—the companions, the streets and the noise, and above all the snobbish glow of belonging to the Christian College.”

Before entering the University for B.A. Narayan failed in the University entrance examination held in the high school. So, he had a lot of time to read. He read Scott’s The Bride of Lammermoor and six other novels. He also read Dickens and admired his queer personalities which he found in his novels. He also read various writers like Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Moliere, Pope, Marlowe, Tolstoi, Thomas Hardy, etc. Narayan liked to read tragic ending novels which would leave him crushed at the end.

It is at this time that Narayan’s personality as a writer began to take shape. In his autobiography, he narrates how he had started writing. It was mostly, under the influence of events occurring around him. Narayan’s father lost a dear friend whom he affected deeply. Narayan wrote ten pages expressing the sorrow entitled as ‘Friendship’ and it was ‘in a flamboyant poetic prose.’ Next, he wrote “Divine Music” ‘in a state of total abstraction.’ The third piece was written about the stars in the sky.

2. Ibid., p.45.
3. Ibid., p.51.
It was in 1926 that Narayan passed the University entrance examination and became a B.A. student at Maharaja's College. In 1930, Narayan became a graduate and after graduation different suggestions came in from different directions. His desire was to be a lecturer in English. For this, it was necessary to be an M.A. in English literature. While Narayan with his application for a seat in the M.A. class, ascended the stairs of the Maharaja's College, he met his friend M.N. Parthasarathy who told him that he would lose all his love for English literature if he did M.A. He also told him that it would destroy his love for literature. Narayan accepted what he said and went downstairs.

After graduation, Narayan was trying to get a job. At this time, his father also retired from service. Since no one could help him in Mysore, he went to Bangalore where his grandmother stayed and there he was planning and thinking what to do. An idea came in his mind. Narayan wrote in his autobiography how the strange idea of writing came in his mind:

"On a certain day in September, selected by my grandmother for its auspiciousness, I bought an exercise book and wrote the first line of a novel, as I sat in a room nibbling my pen and wondering what to write, Malgudi with its little railway station swam into view, all ready-made, with a character called Swaminathan running down the platform peering into the faces of passengers, and grimacing at a bearded face...........

Thus, Narayan's carrier as a writer began. His first novel Swami and Friends was published in October, 1935. The next novel was The Bachelor of Arts which was published by Nelson in 1937. Another novel

4. Ibid., pp. 79-80.
The Dark Room was published by Macmillan in 1938. His other novels published one after the other are: The English Teacher, Mr Sampath, The Printer of Malgudi, The Financial Expert, Waiting for the Mahatma, The Guide, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, The Vendor of Sweets, The Painter of Signs, A Tiger for Malgudi, Talkative Man, The World of Nagaraj and Grandmother's Tale. Out of these novels, only eight novels grouped into pre-Independence novels and post-Independence novels will be studied. It is also necessary to know under what situation Narayan wrote his novels and whether there is reflection of the political, social and economic conditions in his novels.

Narayan wrote his novels under the influence of the contemporary social and economic condition. Narayan began to produce a series of social portraiture novels starting with his first novel Swami and Friends (1935). He is regarded as an interpreter of Indian life and culture. He tries to enter in the private world of the Sudras (Dalits) and non-Brahmins and makes them characters of his novels. In his novel, Waiting for the Mahatma, Narayan tries to show a realistic picture of the location where the outcast live. In 'The Guide' Raju, the protagonist and Rosie, the heroine belong to different castes and an objection is raised when Rosie enters in a house of different caste. In the life of an Indian, class and caste play a very important role and complexities are also created in human relationship. Another social portraiture novel of R.K. Narayan is The Dark Room where Narayan tries to show a clear picture of the Indian social life. In the male dominated society like India woman suffers in the hands of her husband, her oppressor. In this novel, Narayan presents the suffering of an upper middle class Indian wife named Savitri. After her attempt to commit suicide, she returns home and takes her normal duties as a housewife. This is what one can see in the Indian society. In most of his novels, Narayan presents a realistic picture of the Indian social life.
Narayan wrote not only the social portraiture novels but also political novels. The freedom struggle is one of the most significant themes of the period. It was during this period that Indian political novels flourished. The wave of nationalist movement spread in all the fields of national life. Non-Cooperation Movements, Civil Disobedience Movement, Salt Law, Satyagraha campaign, etc. were the important materials for the writers of that time and Mahatma Gandhi became an important figure in the fiction of the period. In many novels, he is often behind the scene and his influence is felt by the characters. The followers of Gandhi appear as the protagonists in some novels of the period such as Narayan’s The Vendor of Sweets.

Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma (1955) deals with directly Gandhiji’s freedom struggle. In his other novels, Gandhiji’s influence is felt by the characters but in this novel, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha and his other movements are dealt with directly. Uma Parameswaran opines about this book:

“It is a Gandhian Novel. Technically, Sriram is the hero of the novel and the plot revolves round him but the predominant figure, even though he is seldom on stage, is Gandhi and the theme is Gandhism.”

The role of intellectuals is very great in Indo-Anglian Literature which is the offspring of the English education in India. From the early nineteenth century many educated persons and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohon Roy were urging Indian people to embrace European civilization. Raja Ram Mohon Roy saw the backwardness in the Indian society. He campaigned against widow burning (Sati). He tried to make people aware of the evils in

Indian society. Religious organisations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj were established for equal rights of the untouchables and for other social reforms. This image can be seen in the social portraiture novels of that time. Not only Raja Ram Mohon Roy, but other writers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Shoshee Chunder Dutt, Toru Dutt, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, etc. also were the pioneers of the Indo-Anglian Literature. After these writers there came a race of fiction writers apart from writers of other branches of literature such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, etc. in Indo-Anglian Literature.