

MATERIAL CONCERNS IN R.K NARAYAN'S SELECTED POST-INDEPENDENCE FICTION: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The treatment of social and national issues from humanistic, realistic and authentic point of view has been the major trait in R.K Narayan's works. His fiction published after independence focus on the dilemmas of post-independence realities. Like most of the Indian writers writing in English during early post-independence times, when India was learning to cope with a new condition of independence, Narayan too wrote fiction that was in sync with the new emerging condition. Like his contemporaries, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, he too chose to represent the socio-cultural ethos of his times but refrained from political statements or involvement. Some of his works especially *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets* focus on the rise of material concerns in post-Independence fiction, and these works have been taken in the present paper. The lingering impact of western ways of life and thinking have also been explored in this paper. Fictional reworking of history and mythology has also been rediscovered by him in this period. National boundary as well as national identity too occupy his attention during this period. There is a discernible shift from his pre-Independence novels in which familial and simple problems of the characters build the narrative to material concerns in many of his post-independence novels. The fiction undertaken in this paper are-*The Financial Expert* (1952), *The Guide* (1958), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967).

Keywords: Materialism, Post-Independence Writing, Western Influence

MATERIALISM:

Materialism refers to the urge for material wealth among individuals. The desire for wealth is not uncommon and most of the humans in present times have this desire. But sometimes when this desire becomes an obsession and when an individual starts believing that only wealth can give social status and is the only indicator of well-being, then it becomes problematic. Although materialism, by and large is contrary to moral life, still it is pursued by large number of people. It sometimes depends on external and internal factors that make an individual more materialistic than others. In Oxford Languages Dictionary, materialism is defined as a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values. In the philosophical term, it is a theory or a belief that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications. The belief that money and possessions is the most important thing in life holds true for a materialistic being. Materialism can also be viewed as philosophical monism, which advocates that matter is the fundamental substance in nature. It also assumes that even mental states and consciousness are the outcome of material interactions of things. Philosophically materialism considers even mind and consciousness as apart of physical processes, which are named as neurochemistry of human brain and nervous system. Materialism is closely related to physicalism- the idea that advocates the fact that all that exists is ultimately physical. German philosopher, Schopenhaur also believes that materialism is the philosophy of the subject who forgets to consider himself but follows the objects of desire. Another important point regarding

materialism, that is applicable to the fiction of R.K Narayan undertaken in the present paper, especially the characters like Maragayya in *The Financial Expert* and Raju in *The Guide* is that materialism did not accept any moral or ethical principles that were highlighted in moral or ethical principles and doctrines. It's not that materialism denied the existence of ethics or morals, but it emphasized that ethics should be the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain for others as well as for oneself. Materialism offers scientific inquiry and a comprehensive worldview that emphasizes the empirical observation and natural laws governing existence. In understanding the fundamental nature of reality, materialist ideas persist and continue to shape contemporary scientific inquiry and challenging societal norms and conventions. It also advocates freedom of thought.

POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA- NEW PARADIGMS.

As India got Independence on 15th August 1947, it entered a new phase of changes as well as challenges. The first twenty-five years of independence were too demanding to test the inner strength and latent resilience of a fledgeling nation which was learning to stand on its own feet after such a long impact of imperialism and colonisation. The first traumatic experience was the birth of a new nation after the partition. The nation witnessed a worst communal carnage, which is still etched in the minds of the people. The princely states got integrated with efforts of Sardar Patel and the political map of the country was further re-drawn with the creation of linguistic states. Nehruvian era saw developments and changes in economic sphere too with the implementation of five years plans, inception of large industrial and public sectors and multipurpose river schemes and agrarian reforms.

Along with the changes in the political and economic affairs, there was virtual transformation in the social scene as well. Through various progressive measures like untouchability Offences Act of 1955 and Hindu Code Bill, there were measures introduced to uplift the scheduled and Backward classes and bring parity between the castes. M.K. Naik has pointed to one very important change in social sphere which is relevant to R.K Narayan's post-independence novels, "But the most disturbing phenomenon on the socio-political scene has been steady erosion of the idealism of the days of the freedom struggle, the new gods of self-aggrandizement and affluence having rather too easily dethroned those of selfless service and dedication to a cause"(Naik189).

There is a clear shift in R.K Narayan's post-independence novels as seen in the three novels taken for the analysis namely *The Financial Expert* (1952), *The Guide* (1958), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967). It is the materialism that attracts the protagonists of these three narratives. Although, the writer keeps the pulse of traditional Indian value system and the religious and cultural strings attached to the characters, but a very subtle shift is discernible.

WESTERN INFLUENCE

Since Britishers ruled India for more than two centuries, the country could not negate the impact of British imperialism and colonialism. That is why India is considered a rich place with intertextuality and impact of western influence. The British presence for such a prolonged span of time seemed to have made an everlasting impact on Indian writing in English as well. Post-independence novel in English has been termed as modern novel. Of course, it cannot be assumed that it is radically different from novels written in pre-independence India. The east-west themes are quite prominent and common in Indo-Anglian novels. The most prominent one being Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. As India got independence, the conflict between religion and reason became sharper. One can also see it as a conflict between tradition and modernity. In Narayan's post-independence novels, especially the novels undertaken in the present paper, the characters like Maragayya,

Jaganand Raju and even Jagan's son Mali, Rosie and Marco, to name a few are influenced by western culture and are rational and at the same time materialistic in their behaviour, actions and opinions. But, at the same time, they are pulled by the orthodox, irrational or superstitious or eastern practices. There is also a mystical tendency in few of them like Margayya and Raju. But the fact remains that despite being a supporter of modernity, Narayan does not objurgate Hindu ethos and cultural traditions, which are the bedrock of Hinduism. The middle-class society that Narayan portrays and with which he is strongly familiar is fairly educated. Although the common people of Narayan's world were not aware of western techniques, still, the desire to prosper and advance in life is the hallmark of many of his post-independence characters of his fiction.

Most of the post-independence novels of Narayan deal with a situation in which the characters are caught in a kind of Hamletian dilemma, a kind of disturbance of order and then there is return or sometimes even renewal. The characters are mostly dissatisfied either with their own self or with the world around them. Whether it is Margayya of *The Financial Expert*, or Raju of *The Guide* or Jagan of *The Vendor of Sweets*, all of them want to make big in life and there is nothing wrong in this approach. But growing frustrations sometimes make his characters rebel against the social customs and traditions. The problem arises when the characters are caught in the conflict between religious values and the modern approach.

The Financial Expert, published in England in 1952, is widely recognised as one of the notable post-independence fiction of R K Narayan. The narrative charts the rise and falloff Margayya, a well-respected and sought after money lender in the fictional town of Malgudi. He is a multi-faceted character, who has honed the skill of solving the perplexing money related issues, which are confusing for the common men. But his insatiable desire to accumulate wealth consumes him. Margayya is the name given to him by his admirers as he has an ability to guide those in financial distress and the name means 'pathfinder'. As Margayya finds himself more and more learned in financial matters, and as he wins the confidence of people as a financier, he starts advising people of Malgudi as to how to obtain loans from the Co-operative Bank. But soon he comes in conflict with the secretary of the Bank and his career as a financier comes to a halt. On the top of it, to make things worse, his son Balu throws his account book into a drain. Despite these hurdles, Margayya, through his consistent efforts again amasses his wealth and returns to his position of a financial expert. But he is unaware of the fact that the accumulated wealth can be potentially harmful to him and this ignorance ultimately brings him to the same point from where he started. He suffers from the delusion of grandeur and his knowledge of financial matters, contrary to his own faulty perception is just skin deep and not authentic. In fact, even his familial relationships as well as his social engagements are not deep and authentic. That is why, he comes out as a complete failure in the end. The novel is compelling and a complex work that delves into the theme of materialism and its huge impact on Margayya, the protagonist of the novel. The narrative can also be viewed as a cautionary tale in the face of materialism, with the emphasis on the authentic familial relationship over material wealth and possessions. Margayya, in his relentless pursuit of wealth and materialism, trump his relationship with others. In fact, his obsessive run for material gains makes him disconnected from his own true self. His search for wealth in fact is due to his inner urge to gain power and prestige. Margayya, in a way represents many like him in the post-independent and postcolonial India who dream of possessing wealth at all costs in rags-to-riches syndrome that was represented in 'American Dream'.

Margayya, like many common, middle-class Indians, views money as the ultimate measure of success and regards it as a key to happiness and social acceptance. His financial aspirations

are sparked by an ingrained and deep-rooted desire to escape poverty and gain position of power and influence. He is hell-bent in elevating himself and his family from the mire of poverty and for that to amass wealth is the only solution in his mind. But this obsession for wealth becomes so over-riding that he puts his own health as well as his relationships at stake. To amass wealth, he is ready to resort to all kinds of strategies and means, even if they are unethical. With his cunning and manipulative strategies, he exploits the vulnerabilities of the innocent and needy, playing with the psychology of the mind of the people who are his customers.

It is the insult and the threat by the secretary of the Cooperative Bank that causes turmoil and a strong desire in Margayya to lift himself from the quagmire of poverty. He regards the cause of his insult and contempt to be the lack of money. He thinks, "I look like a wayside barber with this little miserable box under my arm. People expect me to open the lid and take out soup and a brush. No wonder the secretary feels he can treat me as he likes. If I looked like him, would he have dared to snatch the papers from my box" (*The Financial Expert* 15). He tries to look and behave like the secretary of the Co-operative Ban, to boost his acceptability in the society. Along with the desire for wealth, he also craves for respectability and prestige. The cause of his inferiority complex is his ancestors, who were once lowly corpse bearers and the family had to struggle for almost three generations to rub off this stigma. India being a caste ridden society, Margayya's idea of wealth and respectability doesn't hold any weight.

This novel has compactness and concentration of form, that is why it has a tremendous dramatic power. Richard Church has commented, "*The Financial Expert* is likely to survive as one of the most original pieces of fiction published this year." (34)

A very subtle change is discernible in Narayan's post-independence novels as his characters like Margayya acquire a modern outlook. Of course, Margayya undergoes a great deal of ordeal for forty days to acquire wealth by praying and invoking goddess Lakshmi, but at the same time, he believes in his self-worth and does not believe that man is just the victim of circumstances or fate. This fluctuation between the religious conventions and modern outlook in Graham Greene's views, that he has given in the introduction to *The Financial Expert*, is the strength of the novel, as he says,

Margayya- the sad, ambitious, absurd financial expert is perhaps the most engaging of all Mr Narayan's characters. In his ambition for his boy, his huge dreams, his un-intended villainies, and his small vanities, his domestic tenderness, he has hidden poetry and the unrecognised pathos we so often in Techochov's characters who on the last page vanish into life. (viii)

Another post-independence novel, that strongly focuses on the theme of materialism is *The Guide*, published in 1958. This novel has been considered as one of the most popular novels of R.K.Narayan as it has been successfully filmed and Narayan received Sahitya Academy award for this novel. *The Guide* has multiple themes and has been viewed as a social chronicle. As a typical post-independence novel, this narrative shows in its characters like Raju, Rosie and Marco, a new emerging India. These characters seem to have adopted western values and culture, and are, in subtle ways discarding age-old traditions. Their materialistic tendencies are clearly etched in the narrative. Raju, the protagonist, has materialistic bent of mind as he yearns for objects like cars, clothes and money. Broadly defined, materialism refers to the importance a person places on having and acquiring money and the things money can buy. Materialism hence is often defined as the importance individuals place on the ownership and acquisition of tangible possessions. Raju always has that urge to rise above his condition and position in society. When his mother suggests that he

should marry Lalitha, a girl from the village, he scoffs at this idea. In post-independence novels like *The Guide*, there is subtle shift from the village to the modern life in city. Also, now, people like Raju, who are not so much educated, are still aware of the charm of modern life. Raju wants to marry someone he likes and love. He doesn't want to tie the marital knot in a marriage arranged by his mother. His falling in love and having an illicit relationship with a married woman is an act not in tune with Indian cultural values and ethos of the times. He has a mind of his own, and gives up the business of his father, and decides to become the tourist guide. There is a sharp contrast in Narayan's pre and post -independence novels as the focus in post-independence novels is on modern values and way of thinking. Raju is blessed with the art of glib talking; hence, the profession of tourist guide suits him. "It was in his nature to get involved in other people's interests and activities. 'Otherwise', Raju often reflected, "I should have grown like a thousand other normal persons, without worries in life" (Narayan, *TG* 9)

One can see, that in some of the post-independence novels of R.K Narayan, like *The Guide*, the tilt is towards freedom and new ways of making money. All the three characters, Rosie, Raju and Marco have, in every sense, a modern attitude, impacted by the colonial influence that lingered in postcolonial India.

Rosie's husband Marco is portrayed as a broad-minded cultured person, who marries Rosie despite knowing that she was a dancing girl. Rosie too, unlike the women characters in Narayan's pre-independence novels, is full of spirits and replete with desires and is also open to have an illicit affair with Raju. But all that seems so simple and linear is not so. Rosie is very unequivocal and clear about her past, "I belong to a family traditionally dedicated to the temple of dancers; my mother, my grandmother, and before her, her mother. Even as a young girl, I danced in our village temple. You know how caste is viewed?... We are viewed as public women" (Narayan, *TG* 75)

Where Rosie fluctuates is when she marries Marco, who is moneyed, and seems to have a broader outlook, but is not compatible with Rosie's way of thinking and desires. Rosie remains only a beautiful possession; her dancing talent is only 'street acrobatics'. Rosie tries to compromise within marriage, but Marco is uncompromising and eventually abandons her. She has then nowhere to go, but to have a live-in relationship with Raju. And then, Rosie chooses to become a professional dancer. In her article "Women as Markers of Social Change", Lakshmi Holmstrom makes a very pertinent point which is worth quoting:

The change of name from Rosie to Nalini is significant; it suggests splitting or doubling; it generates a complexity of roles, an ambiguity in her shifting (or negotiation) between them. Thus the tension between the life of passion and the need for responsibility, represented respectively by her own family of dancers and her husband, Marco; later the ambivalence between her need to dance, and the inevitable commercialism of her performances which makes her repudiate her life as a professional dancer and Raju as her manager; the pull between the needs of daily life and its economics and the call of her art. (109)

In the end, the cause of the breakup of Raju/Rosie affair is again due to the intensity of materialist and commercial intent in Raju's mind, who starts exploiting her success and talent in commercial terms. Rosie emerges stronger after her break-up with Raju, and she is able to handle her professional life and career in a better way. Post-independence women of R.K Narayan, like Rosie are stronger and modern. They are not like the characters in pre-independence novels of R.K Narayan, tied to traditions and play the role that society expected them to do.

In his article, “R.K Narayan’s *The Guide*”, C.D Narasimhaiah has also pointed out at “the stresses of the changing society” (132) from the simple agricultural community to industrial and urban society. He has also written in detail in his article how with the coming of the Railway in Malgudi a new set of problems arose which also meant “the undoing of the old ways of living and of cherished values of life” (132). The negativities of modern and new ways of life makes inroads in Raju’s house too. “There is a clash of castes, classes and interests in the persistence of time-honoured customs and the old values on the one hand and the weakening modern social and moral structure on the other” (Narasimhaiah 132).

The characters of Narayan’s post-independence fiction are, though connected to the same milieu of Malgudi, but they are educated enough and progressive in their outlook. Rosie, who is from the family of temple dancers, has intellectual interests too, along with the artistic ones. She too had a good university education, and she is erudite and elite as Marco, her husband, who of course has a kind of megalomania, and he keeps underestimating her. She takes her art of dancing very seriously and spends full three hours, early in the morning in honing and polishing her dancing skills. And, for her theoretical knowledge, she reads the works of art like Bharat Muni’s *Natya Shastra* and various other books to preserve the purity of the art of classical forms. One can see that in post-independence novels like *The Guide*, the characters are either affluent or have the will to become affluent. C.D Narasimhaiah finds admirable use of freedom from the convention in the character portrayal of Rosie, but it holds true for the plot as well as the depiction of Raju as well. *The Guide* written in 1958 is much ahead of its time. Narayan, who, earlier, in his pre-independence novels, had been writing on the commonplace issues of the ordinary middle-class, struggling characters, took a new turn in his post-independence fiction. He touched on those issues which he had taken in his earlier fiction. As C.D Narasimhaiah also comments in this context: “But with all his limitations, Raju has a rich and complex life- achieving integration at last. It is worth while studying this singular success of the novelist’s creation. It is obviously not very easy to make a saint out of a sinner, especially for one with a comic vision of life.” (135)

Even Raju’s attraction for a married woman is not solely a romantic entanglement. Raju has an eye for commercial angle too; his materialistic design makes him own her and let her stay in his house despite his mother’s reluctance. But the relationship of Raju and Rosie doesn’t last long. The reasons for the breaking of this relationship are many. The commercial and materialist mindset of Raju becomes quite apparent to Rosie, who is more into her art and less into the commercial aspect of it. Moreover, the strings of married life keep her mentally stuck to her previous husband, and she suffers from the bouts of guilt as well. There is a clear conflict of tradition and modernity in this novel and Narayan, as a postcolonial Indian writer in English, even while writing about the typical small-town middle-class characters, juggling with the fledgling post-independent India, doesn’t feel comfortable in disconnecting from the cultural and moral values of Indian ethos. Rosie sells her diamonds and collects the cash to help Raju come out of the mess of forgery not out of love, but as a part of her duty. The whole saga of Raju’s fall and eventual rise is built up on the material desires that Raju has.

The Vendor of Sweets (1967) is another of Narayan’s post-independence novels, that can be read in the ambit of materialist philosophy and western influence making inroads in the minds of the simple and ordinary residents of small-town Malgudi. It is a kind of biography of fictional character named K.V Jagan who is a reasonably affluent person and a sweet vendor. The narrative is built around the conflict between the father Jagan and his estranged son Mali, who is, in a way a rebel and who does not subscribe to the traditional ways of life which his father endorse. Mali being motherless, is pampered by Jagan in a bid to shower maternal love that is lacking in his son’s life. Jagan is a hardworking, honest and a successful

businessman, who is very humble and who, in youth has been under the benign philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. He also has religious and spiritual orientation, as the sacred and the holy Text *The Bhagvad Gita* form the staple of his life. He tries to act in accordance with the principles described in Hindu Scriptures, especially, *The Bhagvad Gita*. Being pampered and spoilt, Mali does not feel inclined towards studies, and he decides to go to USA to study creative writing. Without informing his father, Mali steals his father's money and buys his tickets and goes to America. At every stage, Jagan reconciles and accepts, even his son's misdemeanor and treasures every letter that he receives from America and proudly shows to his customers and friends.

Mali returns after few years, totally westernised and brings with him a half-Korean and half American girl named Grace as a 'wife'. His father assumes that they are married. He even accepts Grace in his house and develops an affection for her as his son's wife, when he sees that his son Mali is not giving her enough attention and care that she deserves.

Mali's ambitions are materialistic, and he discloses his grandiose plan of starting a story-writing machine factory, making some anonymous business partners. From America. Jagan is not very happy with this decision and doesn't agree to invest in this project which further brings a conflict between the father and the son. Jagan comes across a 'bearded man' and develops a desire to renounce his life. It is noticeable that in many of Narayan's novels the urge for renunciation is strong in many characters. In *The Guide* too Raju, though unwittingly, renounces his life too.

Meanwhile, Mali is caught by the police for drunken driving and Jagan tells his cousin, "A dose of prison life is not a bad thing" (Narayan, *TVO* 102) But eventually Jagan writes a cheque to the cousin so that he can pay the preliminary fee of Mali's bail. Jagan even agrees to buy plane ticket for Grace if she wants to go back to her homeland.

Ranga Rao's comments on *The Vendor of Sweets* as post-independence novel is worth the quote, "Narayan's success in the post-independence period owes much to his flair for artistic distancing from his protagonists; it is detachment of maturity" (85).

Generation gap is central to *The Vendor of Sweets*. Jagan, the protagonist of this novel is not actually what he projects himself to be. Narayan's post-independence characters, like Raju and Margayya have a materialistic side too, which is more than visible in the texts. As William Walsh, in his article, "Narayan's Maturity: *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, *The Vendor of Sweets* and *The Painter of Signs*" says, "Jagan is both a comic and an anguished figure: comic in his innocent combination of commercial sharpness, fiscal duplicity, vanity, and genuine reverence for Gandhian spirituality ; anguished in his lacerated relationship with his sullen, brutish son Mali"(Walsh 159)

In Jagan's character, Narayan exposes the ritual deceitfulness and self-deception among people who dream of things that are not there. Their unsuccessful and vain attempts to hide themselves from simple prosaic realities are almost farcical. Of course, he is scrupulous about ritual, he adheres to the norms of living as prescribed by Mahatma Gandhi, even the sandals that he wears are made from the hide of a cow which has died of old age or sickness. But, in his own kingdom of kitchen, smoke and frying oil, where he sets on his century-old brassbound chair like a throne, he is very conscious of his business of selling and cooking. William Walsh comments:

"Into the largeness of his spiritual ambition, into his imitation of Gandhi, there is inserted a small measure of mercantile flexibility" (159).

He prepares two cash books, one that has elaborate entries in a ledger for everyone and the other small private notebook, which is entitled to survive without reference to any tax. In fact, the cause of his solitariness is also because of his wilful detachment from his family obligations. Like Raju, his mercantile ambition is a kind of obsession, and he wants to remain away from relatives.

Otherwise, they would be making constant demands on his time in family conclaves, sitting on carpets with a lot of kinsmen exchanging banalities while awaiting the call for the feast. Thus, he had escaped the marriages of his nieces, the birthdays of his brother's successive children and several funerals. (Narayan *TIVOS* 29)

Ultimately, Jagan decides to renounce all and retire from life. The relationship with his son remains disturbing and the division is complete, it is as Walsh suggests the 'division of East and West, of young and old, of child and parent' (162). The financial edifice that Jagan has built up so labouriously and with such an expertise is ultimately crumbled.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Narayan is the writer of middle-class ethos, and his characters are not poverty ridden in any way. The world of his fiction comprises of common, ordinary middle-class, with simple ambitions and dreams. But one can see a shift in his post-independence novels when his characters aspire for bigger dreams, more freedom and more money and materialist concerns. Especially in the post-independence novels like *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, the issue of money and desire for material possessions is given precedence over other issues. In these novels, Narayan shows that Indian society, especially after independence is burdened with great competition, stress and strain and the characters, despite settled in the same fictive town of Malgudi, have materialist dreams and commercial interest, and ambitious, which the characters of his pre-independence fiction did not have. In this changing face of India, Narayan, through these narratives shows that a healthy philosophy of money merits serious consideration. But he also shows, in the ruin of Margayya, Raju and Jagan, that money is a mixed blessing which can become a curse if not judiciously used and understood. Ambition and pursuit of money for money's sake is fraught with unpredictable and grave dangers both for the individual as well as for the society. In the end, it is important to quote M.K Naik's take on post-independence writing which also holds true in case of the post-independence fiction of R K Narayan:

The post-independence Indian scene, its curious criss-cross of rapid socio-political changes in a country whose tradition still remains a strong force has presented a stimulating spectacle, which has naturally evoked a variety of reactions from its writers, including nostalgic idealization of the immediate past of the days of freedom struggle, a strong desire to re-discover one's roots in ancient Indian ethos as also to examine this ethos afresh in the light of westernization...(192)

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