

R. K. Narayan: An Appreciation

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The first Indian novelist in English of international repute was neither Salman Rushdie nor the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul but Rasipuram Krishnaswami Aiyar Naranayanswamy (1906-2001). Better known to his reading public by his shortened name, R. K. Narayan, his career spanned more than five decades, dating from the first published novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) to a collection of stories *Salt & Sawdust* (1993). He was said to have been working on a follow-up to his last novel *The World of Nagaraj* (1990) at the time of his death last year at the age of 94.

Except for a very short, inglorious stint as a teacher at a government school, Narayan was the epitome of the professional writer, a discipline that came not without considerable effort and hardship, at a time when there must have been little demand for writing in English, particularly creative writing, in India. After graduation from college in 1930 at the age of 24, he first pursued opportunity and work in journalism and he has given an account, of course amusing, of his reception and his experiences in his memoir *My Days*. "I offered samples of my writing to every kind of editor in the city of Madras... 'You have a command of the language, but...' was the almost routine statement made." (p.97) His first time in print was an unpaid book review of *Development of Maritime Laws in 17th-Century England* while his first year's income from writing was "ten rupees less money-order charges" or about a dollar and a quarter. *The Hindu*, a newspaper that Narayan came to write for regularly, accepted one of his stories in his second year, and he was able to show his father a check for thirty rupees for

a children's story in the year following.

Childhood, schooling, teaching, marriage are all well-chronicled in Narayan's so-called "apprentice works" (French, p.924): *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938) and *The English Teacher* (1945), the last being regarded as the most autobiographical of his works aside from *My Days*. These as well as most of his other writings are set in a provincial South Indian town that Narayan named Malgudi, half mythical, but often associated with Madras where Narayan was born and brought up or Mysore, where he was educated. Narayan's Brahmin family was only two generations away from its rural roots in the village of Rasipuram, but it had already been drawn into the new world that British colonial government was creating. One grandfather was a minor government official (as was one of Narayan's brothers, Seenu) who amassed the wealth that enabled the family to lead a comfortable urban middle class life. His two uncles were car salesman and photographer, respectively, both prototypes for the new classes growing up in the town that Narayan depicts. His father was headmaster of Maharaja's Collegiate High School, where the first language at school was English, not the Tamil of South India. But being the son of the headmaster had the advantage of privileged access to the school library where Narayan whetted his taste for Sir Walter Scott and after Scott, "a whole row of Dickens...Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Moliere and Pope and Marlowe, Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy—an indiscriminate jumble." (*My Days*, pp.58-9)

In the wake of Salman Rushdie's 1981 best-seller *Midnight's Children* and the post-colonial theorizing of Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern Studies historians, writers like Narayan seem hopelessly outdated and even suspect to a younger generation of Indians. Alpana Sharma Knippling examines Narayan's writings in the 1930s, the heyday of Gandhi's

campaign of civil disobedience, but "what takes the place of an overt nationalist agenda in Narayan's fiction are scattered allusions directed at both the British in India and the contemporary struggle for independence. These allusions, casually recorded, as it were, in the margins of his texts, seem to tell a profoundly ambivalent story about Narayan's relation to the political and nationalist movements..." (p. 172) In a letter to the editor of the Times Literary Supplement, Apratim Barua roundly upbraids the reviewer of *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*: "Clearly Mr. Nayar has not been following recent trends in Indian literature. ...no one today wants to write in the Victorian 'proper' English of Chaudhuri and Narayan. ...Salman Rushdie's 'facile wordplay in Indian English' is far more important than is the faded glory of Nirad Chaudhuri and Narayan." (p. 15) Barua goes on to criticize the editor of the book, the novelist Amit Chaudhuri, for his "predictable" selections. "Did it never occur to Amit-da that giving 50 per cent of the space to literature in English might be a little, shall we say, unjust? And what about women?" (ibid)

Indeed, what about women? A careful reading of Narayan's novels and stories would reveal a writer very sympathetic to the plight of women, who though conservative in outlook and temperament, was both ahead of his times and of his times. There is the singer Selvi in the short story of the same name who throws off a lifetime of obedience to her husband-manager after the shock of her mother's lonely death. In another story ("The Shelter"), a wife who has walked out on her husband encounters him by accident when they both seek shelter under a roadside tree. She questions him: "Did you think I would go and drown myself? Did you look for me in the nearby wells or ponds? It would have surprised me if you had had so much concern." She berates him: "Am I your toy? You think you can pick me up when you like

and throw me out when you feel that way. Only toys are treated thus." Finally, when he makes overtures of reconciliation, she retorts: "I am not my old self. Nothing can hold me thus" and runs off, "vanishing beyond the curtain of raindrops." (Under the Banyan Tree, pp.146-8)

Teresa Hubel, in a pioneering, perceptive study of Narayan's *The Dark Room* writes that her research on the pre-1947 women's movement in India "brought about a cataclysm in my appreciation of *The Dark Room*." On the other hand, Pankaj Mishra terms it "one of his least successful novels" (p.46) while William Walsh in his book-length study of Narayan's oeuvre has this to say of *The Dark Room*: "It is...the closest Narayan comes anywhere to arguing a case. It shows, I think as a consequence, at certain places a wash of unabsorbed feeling. There is a touch of hysteria in the material, and the phrasing at times has a markedly antique and dated quality." (p.43) Of *The Dark Room*, Narayan himself has written: "I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the 'Women's Lib' movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength. A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal victim of such circumstances." (My Days, pp.115-6)

Hubel says that her original impression of *The Dark Room* was like Walsh and Mishra's: a dissatisfied one. But her research on the debates going on in India in the 1930s on women's problems, such as preventing the marriage of girls under the age of 14 or equal access for women to education and work outside the home, made her realize the relevance of the work's "markedly antique and dated quality." Hubel goes on to demonstrate that *The Dark Room* "reveals the traces of the 1930s women's movement in India in its intersections with Indian nationalism of the time." She argues that Narayan documents the

heroine's (Savitri) rebellion and gendered helplessness and "refuses to close on the endnote of tranquillity and detachment that characterizes most of his novels."(p.114) Acquiescence and endurance and submission to the greater forces that orchestrate people's lives "...these themes are what most Western and Indian scholars tend to admire in Narayan's work, for they seem to point to some essential 'Indianness'. (That such a notion of 'Indianness' has been constructed out of imperialism and nationalist discourses usually goes unmentioned.)"(p.127)

This is very well said. Amit Chaudhuri and Pankaj Mishra have both made similar assertions about such critical misreadings of Narayan. Mishra claims that Narayan's novels make him "a more accurate guide to modern India than the intellectually more ambitious writers of recent years. The early novels with their energetic young men, the middle novels with the restless drifters, and in the later novels, the men wounded and exiled by the modern world map out an emotional and intellectual journey that many middle class people in formerly colonial societies have made."(p.47) Chaudhuri points out that when Narayan began writing in the 1930s, "the cultural legacies of the Orientalist scholars, and of the Bengal Renaissance, with its transcendental strain, were still dominant, contributing to an idea of India as a country with an ancient philosophical and religious, mainly Brahminical, tradition. The subject of Narayan's fiction is, if anything, the fictionality of 'timeless India.'" (p.21)

Why is Malgudi invented? It is a place that exists nowhere. Yet liberally scattered throughout Narayan's works are references that situate Malgudi in history. The Painter of Signs (1976) falls in love with Daisy, an ambitious modern woman intent on ruthlessly carrying out government policy on birth control, though no reference is ever made to Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The taxidermist Vasu is the true Man-

Eater of Malgudi (1962): he breaks the law, hunts and kills animals wantonly, despises his "spineless" countrymen. He has equal contempt for the English doctor and the Western-educated veterinarian who has never seen an elephant let alone treated one. The Save The Tiger committee in A Tiger for Malgudi (1983) is supinely inept and quickly agrees to shooting an escaped circus tiger. Nagaraj (The World of Nagaraj) and the Talkative Man (1986), neighbors on Kabir street, are clearly from old Brahmin families, though it is never explicitly stated so, who have been eclipsed by such hustlers as Coomar, "a self-made man" who parleys a two hundred rupee loan from Nagaraj into Coomar's Boeing Sari Centre, "one of the established institutions of Malgudi... crowded with shoppers, mainly women, who spent hours and hours choosing saris" (Nagaraj, p.22), and who are no match for imposters and swindlers such as Dr. Rann, the self-proclaimed "expert" working on a U.N. "project", in Talkative Man.

There is such a parade of rebellious sons, runaway wives, hypocritical elders, corrupt politicians, and tax-dodging venal shopkeepers in Narayan's Malgudi that one can only wonder why his detractors have sometimes charged Narayan with escapism. Michael Gorra in his remembrance of Narayan quotes V. S. Naipaul as saying, "the India of Narayan's novels is not the India the visitor sees. Too much that is overwhelming has been left out." (p.14) And Naipaul, who admires Narayan generally, in his own obituary calls Narayan "the master of small things." There are probably several reasons for this lingering critical assessment. Narayan's prose, ironic and understated, lacks a political edge except perhaps in *The Dark Room* and *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). Neelum Saran Gour explains it best in her review of *My Days*: "In this memoir we see Narayan practicing Narayanisms, a habitually humorous reading given to experiences which were surely far

from funny as in the account of his marriage negotiations.” (p.31) And when Narayan mocks too overtly as in *The Vendor of Sweets*, the Korean-American wife of Jagan’s son Mali seems unbelievable and Mali’s story writing machine a grotesque invention. Finally, the limpid quality of his writing leads readers and critics alike to read him at the surface level of his meaning, I believe.

The Guide, probably Narayan’s best-known work, is a good example of how deceptive his writing can be. On one level, it seems to be the story of how that most modern of con men, the tourist guide, makes over his life after leaving prison and becomes a genuine holy man. On another level, we can see the story of Raju as the illusion of Raju himself as well as of Velan and the other villagers in believing that Raju is indeed a swami and that his fasting will end the drought that is gripping the country. The novel ends on this ambiguous note:

“The morning sun was out by now; a great shaft of light illuminated the surroundings. It was difficult to hold Raju on his feet, as he had a tendency to flop down. They held him as if he were a baby. Raju opened his eyes, looked about, and said, ‘Velan, it’s raining in the hills I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs--’ He sagged down.” (p. 220)

Michael Gorra concludes that Narayan’s work “raises questions that criticism has yet to fully address. Take the question of dharma. Dharma tends to be fixed, determined both by caste and one’s stage in life, and Narayan’s very titles...suggest its centrality in his work. Yet how does dharma affect the novelist’s sense of the relation between plot and character? Is the discovery of one’s proper dharma the same as maturation—do characters governed by dharma change and grow, and if so, how? Narayan is easy to read but hard to understand.”(p. 14) Unfortunately,

as I have shown, Narayan is, by and large, neglected in post-colonial English studies. This is a cause for great regret, especially now that there will be no more stories from The Master Story-Teller.

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