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R.K. Narayan's Deep Faith in Ancient Indian Epics and Legends

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R. K. Narayan is quite faithful to national culture and traditions, as in his novels he describes numerous Indian myths, stories and legends. He is a typical Indian writer, who gives a new interpretation to the ancient legends and myths of India. (1) To express his vision of modern life, he frequently quotes from ancient epics. In his opinion, "All imaginative writing in India has come from the ancient epics from the Ramayana and Mahabharata." (2)

It is said that in this regard he follows the literary trend set by Aurobindo Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu, Tagore and Prem Chand, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. As all these writers and poets were greatly inspired by the Ramayana and Mahabharata. (3) In the same way Indian myths, stories and legendary events are frequently quoted by Narayan in his novels. In this connection S. R. Ramteke aptly remarks: "Hindu myths and ideas have gripped Narayan's mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in most of his novels." (4)

In almost all his novels the major characters are modelled on the legendary characters of ancient epics and these characters frequently follow the beliefs and principles as enshrined in ancient Hindu scriptures. The reason dwells in the fact that Vedas, Upanishads, the Epics and the Puranas are still active sources of inspiration to Indian people. (5) In this connection Narayan has his own opinion. He says, "The impact of life the material and substance of our thought are the same everywhere, in any state. Traditionally, India is the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The value remains the same in every village, town or city." (6)

E. J. Kalinnikova confirms this statement by saying, "In India. though the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are hardly ever used as texts in schools and colleges, their main stories and characters are vividly real to most people, young or old." (7)

Critics are of the opinion that specifically, religious and idealist characters of ancient Indian epic influence the creative work of Narayan. In Narayana's novels we can find courageous Rama, faithful Sita and Savitri, brave Arjuna with his brothers and kings like Harishchandra, Shibi and Lavana. (8) So great is the impact that Narayan himself admits to Ved Mehta, "his inability to write novels without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman." (9) In the words of William Walsh, "the religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan's grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience." (10)

There are many examples that illustrate how Indian myths, stories and legendary characters are used in Narayan's novels. His characters like Srinivas, Ravi and Sampath are modelled on the character of Rama. Narayan writes, "Even in the humble social unit or family, we can detect a Rama striving to establish peace and justice in conflict with a Ravana".(11)

It is said that he portrays the ethical characters so as to emphasize the value of virtuous and disciplined life. Through these ideal characters, he suggests to his readers that the ethics like truth, purity, wisdom, patience, forgiveness and non-violence, which are enshrined in our ancient epics and scriptures, must be safely guarded or preserved. He also portrays immortal characters in his novels, as sometimes he explores the negative shades of a character's personality. The demonic qualities are explored only to emphasize that 'The evil must destroy itself.' He writes, "In areas of military, political and economic power, we see the Ravana, the evil antagonists today...." (12)

The characters of 'Vasu' from 'Man Eater of Malgudi' and 'Sampath' from 'Mr. Sampath' are modelled on the legendary story of Bhasmasura, a demon who scorches all that he touches. 'The Painter of Signs' is based on the relationship of holy Ganga and king Shanthanu from the epic Mahabharata. Srinivas from the 'Printer of Malgudi' is a devout student of Vedic literature. Jagan from the 'Vendor of Sweets' also has a great faith in Vedic literature. Once he remarks, 'All the Vedas have emanated from god's feet'.(13) Describing the importance of belief and principles as depicted in 'Puranas'. Jagan says to Grace, "If you read our Puranas you will find that the wife's place is beside her husband whatever may happen."(14)

In the novel the 'Vendor of Sweets' Jagan, the protagonist is completely biased to Gita. Every day he reads Gita and tries to practice in his daily life the sayings of Gita. Describing the value of epic he says, "There is no such thing as reading this book finally; it is something to be read all one's life. (15) Mahatma Gandhi used to read it every day..... "Gita is a treasure, truly a treasure house of the wisdom". (16) Jagan frequently takes extract from Gita. Krishna-Arjuna discourse at the battlefield of Mahabharata and the theory of detachment as enunciated in Gita is quoted in the novel. Jagan remarks: "We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it....." (17)

Jagan, the protagonist in 'Vendor of Sweets', is closely associated to R. K. Narayan when he feels that the solution of each and every problem lies in Vedas and ancient scriptures. Whenever in his life he is in a flux, he turns to ancient epic for solution. Jagan also at the time of crisis turns to ancient religion and finds out the solution. As he is unhappy and puzzled at the way his son has turned out. He seeks the solution in his ancient traditions that lies in varna-ashram vyavastha, an honored custom of Hindu society that had been proved logical in all settings- in ancient as well as in modern setting. Thus, he resolute that he himself will leave the home, as he cannot throw him out. In this way at some stage in one's life renunciation is required so that others may continue in peace. As it is written in our scriptures:

"It would be the most accredited procedure according to our scriptures- husband and wife must vanish into forest at some stage in their lives, leaving the affairs of the world to younger people."(18) Following the practice of 'vanprastha ashram' jagan leaves the home by saying, "I am off to a retreat, I'm sixty and in a new janma". (19)

In the novel 'The Guide' Raju, the protagonist quotes the Buddha. When he cites the example of a grief-stricken woman to an innocent villager Velan. Raju says that a woman once went wailing to the great Buddha, clasping her dead baby to her bosom- the Buddha said, "Go into every home in this city and find one where death is unknown, if you find such a place, fetch me a handful of mustard from there, and then I'll teach you how to conquer death."(20)

Through this instance, Raju convinces Velan to accept the fact that there is no person without problems in his life. S. R. Ramteke gives his opinion about this attitude of Narayan. He remarks: "Such rational approach will certainly help the masses to get rid of superstitions and blind beliefs in their lives."(21)

Santa rama rao, in her review of Indian writers, rightly concludes, "In one way or other Mr. Narayan gives vitality and an original viewpoint to the most ancient of legends, lacing them with his own blend of satire, pertinent explanation and thoughtful commentary....."(22)

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