

Wisdom in Behaviour and Relationships : Man Protagonists in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to see how R.K.Narayan in his novels viz Waiting for the Mahatma (1955), The Man-Eater of Malgudi (1961), The Vendor of Sweets (1967), The Painter of Signs (1976) and A Tiger for Malgudi (1983) portrays his man protagonists each having ample wisdom. This helps the reader to enrich his/her own behaviour and work on inter-personal relationships. Though Narayan sets his stories about people and their interactions in the fictional town which he names 'Malgudi', his novels cross the boundaries of culture and time. His wisdom combined with wit and humour and the dialogues he gives his man protagonists solves the riddle of life which is interspersed with happiness and tears.

Introduction

Questions related to existence, the purpose of life, inter-personal relationships and life's journey which is interspersed with happiness and tears, have concerned humans since time immemorial. These remain an enigma and are often difficult to address. However, R.K.Narayan through his novels and more importantly the dialogues he gives his characters, provides wise answers to these conundrums. This supreme craftsman, through his narrative, gives an insight to deal with difficult situations wisely.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (10 October 1906-13 May 2001), or R. K. Narayan is one of the greatest first generation Indian writers in English. His writing career spans over sixty years during which course Narayan successfully introduced India to the world through his novels, essays and short stories. He has set his stories in the fictional town of Southern India named 'Malgudi' where he writes about ordinary people, their lives and interpersonal relationships. In his

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novels viz *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1976) and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) Narayan has portrayed his man protagonists in a storyline where their disposition is wise. **Sriram** in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, **Nataraj** in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, **Jagan** in *The Vendor of Sweets*, **Raman** in *The Painter of Signs* and **The Master** in *A Tiger for Malgudi* are man protagonists, who show qualities of wisdom and knowledge. In the process Narayan makes the reader think, analyze and find wise answers pertaining to life and one's role in it. R.K. Narayan has won many awards and accolades, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958, A. C. Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature in 1980, and the Padma Bhushan, India's second-highest civilian award.

The Oxford dictionary defines wisdom as the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight. All religions regard wisdom as one of four cardinal virtues. It is the ability to perform adequate 'action' taking into consideration people, things, events, situations as well as the acumen to apply perception and judgment. A wise person is someone with self-awareness, believing in goodness, right conduct and right living.

The novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* epitomises the virtue of wisdom through Mahatma Gandhi's way of life. Since truth, kindness, sympathy and altruism are an intrinsic part of wisdom, these are reflected in its man protagonist Sriram. He comes under the guidance and influence of Gandhi, who is very wise and knowledgeable. Sriram is shown by Narayan to be truthful in the beginning of the novel when he questions as to 'why anything should be concealed from anyone?' (12) and also wants to 'always like to know what I am doing'(14). However, the values of truth, non-violence, respect for all castes and patriotism dawn on him only when he comes in contact with the Mahatma, who visits his town Malgudi.

Digambar Singh Dewari states:

As Gandhian thought presents experimental truth, Narayan's fiction also presents imaginative truth. The imaginary town of Malgudi which presents a fictional background to Narayan's novels is rightly

viewed by G. J. V. Prasad as “less a place and more a point of view”. Though the topography of Malgudi also expands as Narayan’s career as a novelist matures, Narayan is least concerned in presenting literal truth. (103)

Dhananjay Tripathi, writing on Phenomenology and Consciousness in R. K. Narayan’s novels is of the view:

Waiting For the Mahatma is very significant because it helps to demolish the myth that Narayan escapes the social reality.... (It) provides ample scope for phenomenological reading.... (and) is a full scale portrayal of the author’s consciousness of the Gandhian movement. (206-7)

Throughout the novel, Narayan makes Sriram hear the discourses of Gandhi, and makes Sriram reflect on it and internalise ‘that there must be a great deal in what he says. We always think that we are superior people. How granny bullies that ragged scavenger who comes to our house everyday to sweep our backyard!’ (30-1). Initially though Sriram joins Gandhi’s movement for independence due to his attraction for Bharti, later he comes on his own and shows independent thinking, an ingredient linked closely to wisdom. He says, ‘[E]ven the British government could not make me do what I didn’t want to.’ (198). In this journey of finding himself he learns to question his role in the movement of setting India independent and subsequently goes to jail under the influence of Gandhi for this very purpose. He is released in free India and finally witnesses the Mahatma’s assassination.

In Narayan’s novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, wisdom and knowledge shine in Nataraj’s disposition. Through constant contrast and comparison between Nataraj and Vasu, each symbolic of awareness and ignorance respectively, Narayan is able to stress upon the importance of wisdom. Through his incisive and beautiful one-line dialogues between the two characters, this is brought out sharply. For example, at one place Vasu says, ‘I never forget’, to which Nataraj replies, ‘and I never remember’ (19). Deep philosophical message is depicted thus. To never remember a hurt, hold a grievance, to forget an insult and to forgive unconditionally are essential qualities of wisdom. Such wisdom illuminates

purity of thought, reflected through Nataraj. He is contented and not greedy. He helps Vasu by offering him a room to stay, but is 'not a landlord [A]nd don't want to be one.'(30). Besides, he is wise. In his words, 'As a man of education, Vasu, you should not shut your mind to new ideas.' Analysing the wisdom and maturity displayed by Nataraj, and his contrasting it with Vasu's character, William Walsh states:

In the contrast between Nataraj and Vasu, in the more and more frantic and frightened efforts of Nataraj to oppose Vasu, we see how Narayan writes within a settled scheme. The mode of belief, the inheritance and the characteristic reaction to the social and physical environment — all these recur in his novels. They are the conditions of the civilisation Narayan seems to embody and interpret. It is true, too, that the central predicament of the characters reappears in novel after novel, but the solution adopted by his protagonists, the particular escape from the precise predicament and the conditions in which it takes place – these are different from novel to novel, and show themselves of a human experience which is inexhaustible in its content and significance. (ed. Srinath: 152)

Animosity, anger and resentment are feelings which a person feels when under delusion or ignorance of self. However, once awareness, understanding, knowledge and wisdom dawns, the realization that harbouring such feelings is self-destructive follows. The result is that the person then overcomes such feelings of stupor. The same happens to Nataraj. He is seen reflecting:

I could never be a successful enemy to anyone. Any enmity worried me night and day. As a schoolboy I persistently shadowed around the one person with whom I was supposed to be on terms of hate and hostility. I felt acutely uneasy as long as our enmity lasted. I was never more than a few paces away from him as we started home from school. I sat on a bench immediately behind him and tried to attract his attention by coughing and clearing my throat or by brushing against his back while picking up a pencil deliberately dropped on the floor. I made myself abject in order to win a favourable look or word from my enemy and waited for a chance to tell him that I wanted to be friends with him. It bothered me like a toothache. I was longing for a word with Vasu. I stood like a child

at the treadle, hoping he would look at me and nod and that all would be well again. He was terrible specimen of human being no doubt, but I wanted to be on talking terms with him. This was a complex mood. I couldn't say that I liked him or approved of anything he said or did, but I didn't want to be repulsed by him. My mind seethed with plans as to how to re-establish cordiality. I was torn between my desire to make a grand gesture, such as writing of his printing bill, and my inability to adopt it. (92)

Vasu's theory that 'science conquers nature in a new way each day; why not in creation also? That's my philosophy' (15), is new to the male protagonist, Nataraj, for he wisely believes in the superiority of nature. He does not like it when he hears Vasu talking about his teacher in a degrading manner and is quick to check him with his sensible wisdom, '[A]fter all he taught you to be strong – he was your guru.... He also gave you six eggs a day and – how much milk and almonds was it?' (17). There are many quotations of wisdom that are a part of this novel, for example that 'time and tide wait for none', which has undertones of raising the self and acquiring qualities. This Narayan applies beautifully in the way he brings about Vasu's end. States Nityananda Pattanayak: Continuity in time is reinforced in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* taking cue from the Indian myths and using mythical characters in it. Vasu, the modern version of bhasmasura is crushed under the wheels of time; time is least concerned about his physical powers, about his knowledge power. The hands of the clock in his room move on, least touching the drama of Malgudi life ruffled by the threats of Vasu. Vasu had set his alarm clock to arouse him from the deep sleep but, during the period, his death occurred and the author tells how time is not at all bothered about this important event in the temporal world of Malgudi, "the alarm clock which had screeched in the dark on the previous night was now ticking away modestly. Its pale pink patch must have watched the process of Vasu's death" (221).

Overall, it can be said that Nataraj's disposition shows the predominance of wisdom. He realises that all forms of life should be respected and thus makes an effort to save Kumar, the elephant from being killed at the hands of Vasu. Since Vasu dies due to a blow to his

temple by his own hammer-fist, Nataraj emerges a winner with the knowledge that evil is self-destructive.

Being satisfied with one self in any given set of circumstances is a sovereign point of being wise. In the novel, *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan's words, 'Do you realise how few ever really understand how fortunate they are in their circumstances?' (26) are full of wisdom. Jagan believes in dignity of labour and so once when his son Mali asks him to engage a cook, he retorts with 'do we engage a servant to do the breathing for us?' (24). Jagan does not believe in blame games. Rather he wants everyone to take personal responsibility for growth and development. He says 'Why do you blame the country for everything? It has been good enough for four hundred millions.' (88). Jagan also believes in the philosophy that money earned for need, to make ends meet, leads to happiness and contentment. However money earned for greed leads to lust, jealousy, unhappiness, hatred and strained inter-personal relationships. This shows tremendous wisdom in Jagan's thinking. He considers money to be evil and believes, 'we should be all happier without it. It is enough if an activity goes on self-supported; no need to earn money' (92). Jagan's philosophy of life, filled with wisdom and knowledge, is reflected in his thoughts. He maintains, 'Even when one wants to make profits, one should retain some sense of service. And what would one do with many mansions?' In his wisdom, he quotes a Tamil verse which says that even if eighty million ideas float across your mind, you cannot wear more than four cubits of cloth or eat more than a little measure of rice at a time (70). He does 'not like the idea of cheating his customers' (80) and also 'performs his charity without question' (83). In his words:

I wanted to serve the public in my own way by making available pure sweets, particularly for poor children. If others want to eat sweets, they must have the purest ones that are all. I am thinking particularly of children and poor people. (91)

Laying stress on contentment, and showing wisdom, Narayan asserts in

The Vendor Of Sweets:

Cousin tells Jagan, “Every gift of life you are blessed with: what ninety out of hundred people crave for — money; and what hundred out of hundred people crave for – contentment. Yet you have not mastered one thing, that’s the art of looking happy.” (43)

Wisdom is reflected in Jagan’s words when he says, ‘Didn’t you tell him that books must be treated respectfully, being a form of the Goddess Saraswati?’ (30). He again states, ‘Light rays should soothe the optic nerves and not stimulate them’ (124). Then again he utters the words, ‘At first don’t hurry, but when you decide, be swift and positive.’ At another place he says, ‘We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it.’ (132). Knowledge of different cultures, practices, customs and rituals should lead to filtering out whatever one does not agree with. This is possible only when one acts under the influence of the virtue of wisdom and self-awareness. Blindly following another country’s cultures or customs can lead to confusion and delusion. P. K. Singh, while critically evaluating Narayan’s novels, states:

The east and west encounter is remarkably visible in the novel. The westernised modern India is set against the traditional India. Narayan is aware of the fact that a good number of young men who go to America return with westernised thinking having a motif to ignore their traditions and customs.... The crisis of values in the Hindu joint-family life can well be identified with the clash of the two generations. (56)

The man protagonist, Raman in the novel *The Painter of Signs* is shown to have traits bearing the virtue of wisdom and knowledge at the very beginning when he is ‘determined to establish the Age of Reason’: I want a rational explanation for everything, he cries, otherwise my mind refuses to accept any statement.... I am a rationalist, and I don’t do anything unless I see some logic in it. (5)

He is a painter of sign-boards and one day while commuting, he buys wisdom in the form of a message by a professor. When he unfolds the piece of paper containing the town hall Professor’s message, it reads “This will pass.” The novel states:

He studied the message, and its significance seemed to deepen while he brooded over it, giving him a feeling of perpetually gliding away from objects and movements. Losing all sense of stagnation, Raman felt suddenly light at heart (27).

The character of Raman shows tremendous wisdom in the way his understanding about man-woman relationship evolves. Being at an age when he can get attracted to women, when his libido is at its peak, 'he wished to establish that the man-woman relationship was not inevitable and that there were other more important things to do in life than marrying... He had steeled himself against this blunder committed by human beings since Adam. If Adam had possessed a firm mind, the entire course of creation would have taken a different turn.' (45). However Raman gets attracted to Daisy, a social worker, as he spends more and more time in her company, and gets a chance to know her closely. Once, while travelling, he wants to get intimate with Daisy. As chance would have it, she is not inside the cart but up on a tree to save herself from a tiger. The next day Raman realises his folly and thanks Daisy for saving him 'from myself' (96). He falls in love with her. Daisy lives with him for a while but realises that her career is her first priority. She wants to leave Raman. The virtue of wisdom shines in Raman's character when after a while he lets her leave him. There is no feeling of desperation, revenge or jealousy. Perhaps a sense of comfort in telling himself that 'maybe we will live together in our next *janma*.' (183). Because of his wisdom, Raman becomes practical in his approach to life and retreats to the most frequented place, the Boardless, 'that solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business.' (183).

In his novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Narayan uses his creativity superbly. He makes an animal, a tiger his mouthpiece. Narayan portrays the tiger on the possible assumption that 'he has only the appearance of a tiger, but he is not one.... Inside he is no different from you and me' (146). Since the novel is an autobiographical account of the tiger Raja, Narayan's perception of 'need vs greed' even in animals comes on board when he makes Raja say, 'Tigers attack only when they feel hungry, unlike human beings who slaughter one another without purpose or hunger' (117). The

man protagonist in this novel, The Master, is portrayed by Narayan as a man who has attained knowledge and wisdom. He does not believe in calling any form of life as a beast. In Raja's words

My Master pushed his way through the crowds and admonished, "Never use the words *beast* or *brute*. They're ugly words coined by man in his arrogance. The human being thinks all other creatures are beasts. Awful word!" (117).

The entire conundrum of life is addressed by Narayan in a powerful conversation, involving the Master:

Someone said, "What a reckless man you are! Who are you?"

"You are asking a profound question. I've no idea who I am! All my life I have been trying to find the answer. Are you sure you know who you are?" (118)

Towards the end of the novel when Raja is down spirited, confused and is hesitant to leave his master, the latter says:

Listen attentively: My past does not exist for me, nor a future. I live for the moment, and that awareness is enough for me. To attain this state, I have gone through much hardship, I don't have to explain all that now. I have erased from my mind my name and identity and all that it implies. It would be unthinkable to slide back. You must live your own life and leave me to live mine and end it my own way. (171)

The Master's wisdom gets further reflected when he warns his ex-wife, '... we come into the world alone, and are alone while leaving?' (172). Old age is considered as a time which is dreaded by all human beings, since it signifies helplessness and dependency on others, and a time when beauty and health bids farewell and the value of a person gets diminished. However, the Master gives a new dimension to his age of piled up years. He says to Raja:

Raja, old age has come on you. Beautiful old age, when faculties are dimmed one by one, so that we may be restful, very much like extinguishing lights in a home, one by one, before one goes to sleep. Listen attentively. You may live a maximum of five years; I don't think we should risk your suffering starvation or attack from other creatures

or hunters. Once they know you are old and weak, they will come for you and you are going to be alone because we are about to part.(174)

The Master explains his philosophy:

No relationship, human or other, or association of any kind could last forever. Separation is the law of life right from the mother's womb. One has to accept it if one has to live in God's plans. (174)

Finally, he prophesies to the tiger: 'Both of us will shed our forms soon and perhaps we could meet again, who knows. So goodbye for the present' (176). In K. A. Qazi's words:

Narayan wants to prove that the world is not Maya. In this world, one has to obey the ideology and social norms in order to be at peace and any revolt against these may lead to a transitory period of *jouissance* or ego fulfilment but in the long run it will result in a split or frustrated *self* which needs to be avoided. It is one of the main reasons why in the Indian philosophical or mystical tradition, there is emphasis on a guarded and detached towards the material progress and focus on comic sense of detachment is in lieu of ascetic's transcendental withdrawing gaze and renunciatory ethic as one finds in the residents of the Malgudi. (116)

When reflecting on knowledge and wisdom, the philosopher Bertrand Russell stated

There are, I think, several factors that contribute to wisdom. Of these I should put first a sense of proportion: the capacity to take account of all the important factors in a problem and to attach to each its due weight.... There must be, also, a certain awareness of the ends of human life.... It is not only in public ways, but in private life equally, that wisdom is needed... It is needed in the choice of ends to be pursued and in emancipation from personal prejudice.... I think the essence of wisdom is emancipation, as far as possible, from the tyranny of the here and now.

Conclusion

R. K. Narayan's novels carry within them explicit and implicit moral values, and lay great emphasis on the intrinsic good nature of human beings. In his writings goodness ultimately triumphs over evil. Deep belief in an ethical and principled value system also characterise

his novels, and their characters. His heroes portray an evolving consciousness, which may begin with a note of uncertainty, turmoil and loneliness, but ends up in certainty, peace and fullness. Combined with this, there is a deep faith in the positive features of the traditional Hindu faith in many of his novels. David W. Atkinson (1987), who has researched the 'Spiritual Growth in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan' traces the concept of '*dharma and karma*' (religion and action in the thematic pattern of his novels. The individuals in Narayan's novels pursue the fundamentally spiritual quest for self understanding. In the above mentioned novels, he paints the personality of the man protagonists with liberal colours of wisdom and knowledge. In the events which follow through the course of the novels, the questions regarding 'life' and 'self' are answered. The complex riddle of life and questions 'Who', 'Why', 'When', 'Which' and 'Where' get addressed with simple solutions. Thus the reader gets a wise vision of to life's complex conundrums related to 'self' 'existence', 'money', 'relationships', 'kindness' and 'peace' etc. . To conclude we can say that since Narayan's writings deal with emotions, they are accepted and read the world over crossing the boundaries of culture and time where the reader successfully finds wise answers to life's many dilemmas.

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