

---

## Relationships between Various Characters in the Novels of R.K. Narayan

# 22

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui

---

### Abstract

R. K. Narayan was a pioneer and had legitimately occupied an exclusive place amongst Indo-English novelists. He casts a great impression on Indian fiction in English. Although he was born and brought up in Madras and his mother tongue was Tamil, he was internationally acclaimed as the greatest Indian fiction writer in English and needs no introduction to an average reader. Narayan art as a novelist was largely limited to storytelling, for the story is the distinguishing characteristic of his fictions. As a genial story-teller Narayan held his listeners simply spell-bound. He had a strong penchant for story-telling. For his writings, the story really matters. He created a world of his own and given it a name Malgudi which is the only locale of his writings and his characters revolved around this imaginary town which is a microcosm of India. He discussed issues of caste appertaining to man-woman relationship and Indian marriages. The kundli, horoscope, and similar caste were the basis of Indian marriage. Person who interferes with the caste and Indian tradition is considered outcaste. It could be

---

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui  
Department of English, Radhey Hari Govt. P.G. College, Kashipur, Udham Singh  
Nagar, Uttarakhand, India. Email: shakeba.siddiqui5182@gmail.com  
Anu Books, India  
Gender Roles and Green Concepts: Pathways to Environmental Sustainability  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB302-F24.Chapter1>

said that, “The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleep religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously”. The novelist intellectually enumerated and enunciated some of the well-known causes of communal conflicts. According to him communal tensions are rooted in intolerance and hatred, which are in outcome of religion. By and large, killing of wildlife, depletion of biodiversity, prostitution, alcoholism, cheap publications, acquisition of sibling’s properties through unfair means, red-tapism, corrupt officials, and weak governance are the areas of corruption highlighted in the novels of Narayan. While discussing the social issues in his novels, Narayan only put up questions to the society without any request of amendment or solutions.

### **Introduction**

In his novels, R.K. Narayan largely confined himself to family relationships. He was sincere to his subjects, and because of this he evoked the sense of reality in the deft handling of interpersonal relationship in a Hindu joint family, especially Hindu South Indian family. He treated the themes of the family with an artistic restraint, for he knew it intimately and understood it thoroughly. Narayan’s treatment and delineation of human relationships as one of the major themes of his fiction are largely cautioned to family relationship in the Indian joint family. The author’s chief concern was human relationships especially the relationship of the members of an Indian family where grand-fathers, grand-mothers, grand-uncles, parents, uncles, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons live in the same home. Each looking to the well-being of the others and there was a sense of personal, economic and social dependencies between them. He very effectively detects the minuteness of each character and effectively displays the clashes between the emotions and principles of his characters.

Talking in Chicago in the mid-fifties to an academic audience of America who wondered how so many different persons could live, work and budget-balance under the same roof, Narayan explained, “I

have always stressed the point about the joint family that this system of living affords protection to the oldest and the youngest in a family. A family in which several persons live together with their wives and children produce an extreme sense of security in the children, who move with all the members of the family freely, and when their parents go out there is no problem of engaging a baby-sitter. The children do not feel lonely, as they generally spend their time with their cousins, uncles or grandparents. As a matter of fact, in big household children hardly ever cling to their parents. They get a balanced training as they are wanted by someone or the other and if they are spoilt by their parents they are certainly disciplined by uncles or others and vice-versa.

Anyway, children grow up very well in a corporate household without much angularities, or over-sensitiveness. For old people their original domestic life has an appearance of continuance. The old parents never lose touch with the affairs of the family, giving plenty of advice and guidance, sometimes offering even a difficult point of view. All of which gives them a feeling of having something to do.

It is the efficiency of his writing that he very minutely analyzed the details of every relationship. He understood the characters deeply. The human characters, their feelings and emotions are the most paying and interesting subject of study in his novels. He not only understands their external behaviour, but also their inner feelings and thoughts. In the words of Bharadwaj, "*Narayan, like D.H. Lawrence, displayed the dramatization of various human relationships as the dominant theme of his fiction. A study of their nature and scope naturally enables us to understand the relationship in which an individual and society stand to each other. Narayan depicted the development of individual consciousness in a continuation of time. Time itself is conditioned by tradition as displayed in a larger context in society and the spirit of change which is result of the inspiration of accidental scientific thought and English education*".

### **Father-Son Relationship**

Of all the family relationships, paternal love is the most significant refrain in Narayan's fiction. One of the basic relationships

in the family is that of the father and son. He very minutely examined the fine details of the clashes between the emotions of the characters in father-son-relationship. Most of the major characters in his novels are devoted and protective fathers. This is largely because, we may recall, Narayan himself was a protective father. "When my daughter packed up and went away to live with her husband; I felt rather at a loose end at first. Having practiced the role of a protective father all along, I found myself unemployed" (Narayan, 1975).

This protective instinct of fathers is more particularly evident and dominant in the traditional middle-class joint families that Narayan mainly deals with in his novels.

In their excessive love and affection to their sons, the fathers often forget their proper role to build the character of their sons and by the time they realize their mistake, if they realize at all, it is too late in their life for both the father and son. This happens in his novel just as it happens in quite a few middle-class families in India. Quite often the fathers are so pre-occupied in their own perversities, such as the foul art of making quick money that they leave their sons to look after themselves and their studies. Their unbridled and neglected growth makes them so assertive in course of time that they defy all norms of decency as obedient sons. Leaving their fathers with no options but to give in under a curse. Most of the major characters in Narayan's novels are dented parents within the limited guidelines to which their sons simply react in their own way- sometimes because of the generation gap and sometimes because of the impact of maternity. The occasional conflict between tradition and modernity is the focal point of writer's portrayal of the father-son relationship.

In *Swami and Friends*, the father-son relationship is rather traditional. The father W.T. Srinivasan is a loving and protective father whom Swaminathan holds in awe. Swami always stands in awe of his father. Out of sheer respect for his father, he does not enter his father's study room, nor does he ever pretend illness as an excuse to avoid going to school, as Babu did in *The Dark Room*. The angry self-explanatory letter that Swami's father writes to Ebenezer, the

headmaster of Albert Mission School where Swami is the student clearly shows a father's concern and anxiety for the well-being of his son suffering from inferiority-complex on account of being Hindu in the class only because he is a non-Christian boy in the Christian school. In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran's father does all that he possibly can for the happiness of his son who has made his heart on marrying the beautiful Malathi and when Chandran's horoscope doesn't match with that of Malathi's; the father feels like dropping the idea of Chandran's marriage with Malathi. But then he is moved by his son's words spoken in a thick voice: "Father, will you still try and find out if something can't be done?" He writes to the girl's father, D.W. Krishna Iyer, once again to reconsider the question of the stars and their potency in the two horoscopes.

Later also, he says nothing very effective when Chandran returns home after eight months of wandering in and around Madras, just as he says nothing when Chandran runs away in frustration. One of the best points about '*The Bachelor of Arts*', observed Uma Parameshwaran, "is this relationship, the wordlessly intimated bond between parents and son-the sorrowing father not tending the garden and keeping Chandran's room spotlessly clean."

In *The Dark Room*, Ramani, the domineering father, is genuinely concerned about his children and their proper education. When his son Babu, supported by his mother, is reluctant to go to school because he has a headache (merely a pretext), he sets his son right by telling him off:

"Look here, young fellow. I've been your age and played all these dodges in my time. So you can't trick me", said Ramani and turned to Savitri, "which of us was right?"

Savitri blushed, "The boy did have a headache in the morning". She said and felt ashamed of herself for her excessive concern.

"Listen", Ramani said to Savitri, "Bear this in mind. There is a golden law of headache. They came in time for school and leave in time for Cricket." He laughed heartily, well pleased with his epigram. Babu tiptoed away (Narayan, 1938).

This is the proper role of a father in India. Ramani errs as a husband for whom he is condemned, but as a father he does not. Later in the novel, when Savitri runs away from the house in sheer disgust, Ramani looks after the children well and he even takes them for a movie, though he does not see it himself. He deserves award of praise for his devotion to his children.

In *The English Teacher*, which is largely autobiographical, Krishnan makes no secret of his delight in his daughter Leela. He loves and looks after Leela just as Narayan loved and looked after his daughter Hema. Krishnan is as loving and protective a father as the novelist himself.

Sampath in "*Mr. Sampath*" may be a rogue and a villain, but even he is proud of his children and takes care of them at all costs. Srinivasa, in the same novel also full of concern about his son. He feels strongly about his son when he is away from him, and even feels guilty of having neglected his wife and son. He is deeply moved when he sees his son in a tattered coat which is also a size too small for him.

Nataraj in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is also a very supportive and caring father. He does not want his son, Babu to come to press or to see Vasu, as the latter could harm his son. Vasu, is the only major character who has no feeling for children. He happens to be the only "total villain" in Narayan's fiction. Narayan seems to suggest that the man who has no paternal love in him ceases to be a man and deserves to be cursed. The father-son relationship is the pre-dominant theme in *The Financial Expert* where the excessive love of a fond parent is as much responsible for his undoing. The novel demonstrates how an excessive fondness of Margayya and his wife plays havoc with their only son Balu. The novelist offers his own comments on the fond parents and the irreparable damage that they might possibly do to their child.

*The Vendor of Sweets* is again a parallel study in the father-son relationship. Mali is the only child of Jagan, the vendor of sweets. He is born ten years of Jagan's marriage with Ambika. Fearing that Jagan might remain childless forever, Jagan's parents take Jagan and

his wife Ambika to the Santana Krishna Shrine, a visit that is the only known remedy for barrenness in women. The pilgrimage and prayer for a child proved fruitful and Mali was born.

Jagan did his best to bring up the child according to his own orthodox Hindu *Sanskaras*. Jagan's wife died when Mali was just a small kid. Naturally, Jagan was all the man fond of the helpless and motherless boy. He was never harsh to the child. "He had never been harsh to the boy so long as he could remember, he had always got him whatever he wanted there twenty years; during the last ten particularly he had become excessively considerate, after the boy lost his mother". Jagan is particularly interested in the diet of his son. He develops almost a maternal obsession about feeding the boy properly and, therefore spends most of his time in cooking for his son.

Jagan is so loving and protective father that he does not do or say a thing that is likely to annoy or irritate his son. But Jagan is bewildered when one fine morning his son suddenly announces his decision to give up his schooling. Mali eventually gives up his studies and begins to avoid his father, who "had never suspected that his zeal for education was going to ruin their relationship. He wanted to make it up with his son<sup>1</sup>.

Having given up his studies, Mali wants to write a novel and hopes to earn twenty-five thousand rupees out of it. The prospect seems wonderful to Jagan who remarks, "I never knew that my son was such a genius<sup>1</sup>." He adds, "I hope he will also emulate my philosophy of living, simple living and high thinking, as Gandhi has taught us". He encourages Mali to finish his novel in time but quite expectedly; Mali does not succeed in his ambitious endeavour. Jagan is disappointed to know that the planned move makes no progress. Here, Narayan very efficiently described the clash between the emotion and principles of the characters. Jagan is a man with Gandhian principles and his son has different emotions than him. There was hardly any communication between father and son. The only link between them was the five-rupee currency note that he left on the table every morning and checked later to find out if it had been accepted. The boy's movements were so

finely adjusted out of orbit that though they lived under one roof, they might be in two different worlds. When he saw the light through the chink in the door, Jagan knew that the boy was in his room. He dared not knock on it. Rarely did they ever reach home at the same time so that there was no chance of their meeting in the hall. Jagan felt harrowed by the lack of information. This is the beginning of the breach in the harmonious relationship between the two. The son becomes the cause of the father's anxiety. Jagan is an object of pity for the cousin who tried to comfort him, "You are blessed with every gift of life with what ninety out of a hundred people crave for and with what a hundred out of a hundred do not attain contentment. Yet you have not mastered one thing, that's the art of looking happy. You are always looking one worn"<sup>1</sup>. There is a greater shock in store for Jagan when he comes to know through his cousin that Mali plans to go to America. Jagan is not prepared for his geographical separation from his son. He is seized with the feeling of panic and insecurity. His national pride is also hurt to learn that his son wants to go to a foreign country not merely for a visit but to learn the art of writing. "Did Valmiki go to America or Germany in order to learn to write his *Ramayan*?" (Narayan, 1967). He asks furiously. Mali stealthily took ten thousand rupees from his father's secret treasure in the Pooja Room and left for the United States without Jagan's knowledge or consent. When Jagan discovers this, he is not angry and was fully reconciled to his son's action. He is even ready for monthly remittances, if required for his son. Jagan is immensely pleased to receive Mali's letter from America and reads them to his intimate friends just as he read the *Bhagvat Gita* to himself. He is no longer as unhappy as he was because of his separation from his son.

During his stay in America, Mali gets completely westernized. He not only eats beef, but also develops contempt for Indian norms and manners. When Mali returns home with an 'imported' young girl, his father is overwhelmed by the sight of his son who has made a spectacle of himself like most of the Indians who visit America. However, he is happy to note that his son has "grown taller, broader and fairer"<sup>1</sup>. But Jagan feels outraged to know about Jagan's habit of



eating beef. “The *Shastras* defined the five deadly sins and the killing of a cow headed the list<sup>1</sup>”. Matters become worse when Mali indicates the girl at his side and says, “This is Grace, we are married<sup>1</sup>”. Grace is a half-Korean, half-American girl, not actually married to Mali but living with him as a wife. Here comes the clash between the emotions and principles of the characters of Jagan and Mali. As though he is a very emotional father, he has full and loving emotions for his son. He always supported him for his entire misdoing because of his emotions he always accepted the decision of his only son Mali but this event hurt him, a lot because of his principles. He was not able to accept the girl as his daughter-in-law, Jagan’s *sanskaras* do not permit him to accept Grace, a foreign and casteless girl, as his daughter-in-law. The crisis deepens when Grace reveals the fact to Jagan that she and Mali are not actually married though they live like wife and husband.

### **Mother-Son & Equivalent Relationships**

The role of Mother in the novels of Narayan is as essential and permanent as that of Father. The mother is as much an anchor of a child’s moral being as the father. It is noticeable in the novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, the character –Chandran, who abstains from falling into the clutches of Kailas and his vices, it is only an account of moral lessons he has learnt from his mother at home.

Chandran tells Kailas: “Excuse me! I made a bow never to touch alcohol in my life, before my mother”.

It is truly the mother who preserves and perpetuates the traditional sections of the family in India. The author advocated the mother and child relationship and considered it holy and sacred. The novelist in *The Bachelor of Arts* very well portrayed the ideal mother-son relationships with all its delicacies. The chapter seventeenth of the novel appears like ‘the intensive care unit’ for the mother and her son, both of whom are in the train going to Talapur. Chandran, as accompanied by his mother, is on his way to that town to see and select his would-be-wife Susila. The dialogue in the train between Chandran and his mother shows the intimate friendly relationship between them.

“It is all a matter of fate”, said mother, “You can marry only the person whom you are destined to marry and at the appointed time when the time comes, let her be the ugliest girl, she will look all right to the destined eye” (Narayan, 1937). In this novel, the novelist tried to define the mother-son relationship in the traditional families of India.

“Mother is a sacred object. It is a commodity whose value we don’t realize as long as it is with us. One must lose it to know what a precious possession it is. If I had my mother I should have studied in a college and become a respectable person. You wouldn’t find me here...Mother is a rare commodity.”

Not only mother but also mother-like relationships are also portrayed very well in the novels of Narayan. The next even more permanent, at times, is the enduring relationship between a grandmother and grandson in India.

In Indian traditional families, as long as grandmother is actively alive, it is she who runs and rules the household, relegating her daughter-in-law to the background. She remains “*The Confidential Clerk*” of her grandson, who is usually and unmistakably the apple of her eye. She is seen sitting in her room, fondling her grandson when he is a babe and reprimanding him whenever he errs when he is a grown-up or she may be found doing some light, odd jobs. Invariably, she is a fond grandmother, respected and acknowledged by her son and his wife as the supreme authority whose instructions and wishes must be obeyed and carried out undoubtedly.

Narayan’s ‘Granny’ is paternal grandmother in the novel *Swami and Friends*. She is an old, hard of hearing and almost blind lady, who spends most of her time in her room stacked with all her personal belongings. However, Swami feels very “*snug and safe*” in her company. Swami, puts his head in his granny’s lap after his night meal, and she tells him all kinds of stories from the Indian Epics. Swami often interrupts her to say something either about Rajam or some incidents of his school. She attentively listens to the Rajam story and advises Swami to work hard in order to get high marks like Rajam. In her traditional role, Swami’s grandmother is quite loving and protective,

for she hardly ever displeases the young boy, who is never tired of his frequent gossips with her grandmother. This was the image of traditional grandmother in India and the relationship between grandmother and son, which Narayan portrayed through the characters, and the events between them. But another type of image and relationship he created in his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* and the clashes of principles and emotions between the characters can also be depicted from this novel after noticing minutely the type of relationship between Sriram and his granny. Sriram's grandmother is most unlike Swami's in the novel *Swami and Friends*. As both of Sriram's parents are dead, he has a protective relationship with granny. He grows-up under her protective care and supervision. There are only two members in Sriram's family as his mother dies while giving birth to him, and his father, a Subedar in the British Army was killed in the First World War. He was raised by his grandmother, who is custodian of considerably large landed property and accumulated amount of pension of Sriram's father.

Being a devoted and dedicated granny, she keeps worrying about him if he stays out of her sight. The boy, in turn, becomes a recluse and does not mix up with other boys of his age. He mostly remains inside the house reading books or staring at the streets below from the upper window of his room. In spite of all the care and encouragement he could not be able to complete his graduation. On his twentieth birthday-his grandmother presents him the bank passbook showing a balance of thirty-eight thousand five hundred rupees seven annas and six pies. She formally grants Sriram the right to spend his father's money; besides handing over to him the ownership of the large landed property. Having inherited such a large sum and vast property, Sriram, the young *Subedar* and *Zamidar* rises from boyhood to manhood with a new sense of power and freedom. Even though Sriram's grandmother makes him the master of his inherited fortune, she still exercises full control over him and his expense. As a dutiful grandmother she gives him a sound piece of advice on her first withdrawal of two hundred and fifty rupees.

“Remember, I don't have to ask you what you do with your own funds. It's your own business. You are old enough to know things,

that it all- why you want two hundred and fifty rupees now...Remember one thing. One is always better off with money unspent. It's always safe to have one's bank-balance undamaged..."

Through these lines, the role of over-protective and concerning grandmother can be noticed who always tries to enrich his grandson from her valuable suggestions.

Granny cried, "Give it here", and snatching the paper from his hand, said, "Correct it to fifty. I'd have torn up this, but for the fact that it is your first withdrawal form, and I don't want to commit any inauspicious act."

Here a small clash can be noticed through the words of Sriram when he says- Sriram obeyed, muttering, "See! This is just what I suspected! I'm supposed to be the master of his money, but I cannot draw what I want. A nice situation" (Narayan, 1955).

Later in the novel, Sriram fell in love with a girl named Bharti who was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. In spite of knowing that his grandmother does not approve of Gandhi and his preaching, he joined camp but solely for the sake of his love for her. The clashes can be seen when it was noticed that Sriram is aware that he is the sole cause of his grandmother's anxiety because of his frequent, long absence from home but he is helpless because of his love. He comes across the clashes between the emotion and principles of his and his grandmother when Granny comes to know from the schoolmaster that Sriram is in the Mahatma's camp, she simply wails the sorrow:

"Ah! What was he doing there?" asked alarmed Granny, for her Mahatma was one who preaches dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police. She didn't like the idea. She wailed, "Oh! Master why did you allow him to stay on there? You should have brought him away. It's so late and he has not come home. As his old teacher you should have weaned him away from there!"

Granny is greatly distressed by his activities under the tutelage of the girl he loves. Later, when Sriram goes underground to evade his arrest by the police, his granny dies probably of shock.

An exactly parallel situation crops up in “*The Painter of Signs*”, where young Raman has no parents and lived under the protective care and control of his old aunt who is more than a mother for him, for it is she who brings him up. Every word from his aunt is a law for the obedient Raman. She is as much devoted to him as he to her.

Their mutually dutiful devotion to each other lasts until Raman decides to marry Daisy, a social worker of dazzling beauty. There come the clashes between them. Raman woos Daisy so assiduously that she eventually gives herself up to him and even promises to marry him before long. Much as she loves Raman, the old aunt of traditional outlook disapproves of this marital alliance between a Hindu boy and an apparently Christian girl. She tried a lot to resist Raman for marrying Daisy but she felt shock when she came to know that he is bent upon marrying Daisy. She threatened Raman that she will leave the home but Raman was not at all moved by her threats.

Narayan again portrayed the same condition in the novel *The Guide*. Raju’s mother faced a similar condition when Raju fell in love with a *Devdasini* girl and a married woman Rosie. Raju’s father died when he is still very young. Like most mothers, she is kind and tolerant and Raju is a dutiful, obedient son until troubles sparks-off on account of Rosie’s entry into Raju’s life. His mother is entirely devoted and dedicated to the well being of her only son. It is only out of her love and affection for Raju that she withstands the presence of Rosie in her house. She disapprovingly accepts Rosie when Raju brings her in, but after a few months she realizes the enormity of the situation and tells Rosie, “After all, You are a dancing girl. We do not admit them in our family, Understand? You cannot stay like this in our house. It is very inconvenient. You should not be seducing young fools, deserting your husband... You must clear out by the next train. You must promise to go. We will give you money for your railway ticket<sup>1</sup>.”

Raju’s mother opposes Raju’s love for Rosie and disapproved it in the following way:

“My mother came running out of the kitchen with tears in her eyes, she flew straight at the sobbing Rosie, crying, ‘Are you not

satisfied with your handiwork, you she-devil, you demon, where have you dropped on us from?’ Everything was so good and quite-until you came; you came in like a viper. Bah! I have never seen anyone work havoc on a young fool! What a fine boy he used to be. The moment he set his eyes on you, he was gone. On the very day I heard him mention the serpent girl, my heart sank. I knew nothing good could come out of it. I didn’t interrupt my mother. I allowed her all speech she wanted to work off, feeling she had bottled up all these weeks. She then catalogued all my misdeeds down to my latest appearance in the court, and how I was going to lose even this house, so laboriously built by my father (Narayan, 1958).

### References

1. Aikant, S.C. (2007). Colonial Ambivalence in R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42(2): 89-100.
2. Narayan, R.K. (1938). *The Dark Room*. MacMillan London. Page 14.
3. Narayan, R.K. (1937). *The Bachelor of Arts*. Nelson, London. Page 158-161.
4. Narayan, R.K. (1955). *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Methuen, London. Page 8-9.
5. Narayan, R.K. (1958), *The Guide*. Methuen, London. Pages 169-170.
6. Narayan, R.K. (1975). *My Days*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publication, p.166.
7. Narayan, R.K. (1967). *The Vendor of Sweets*. The Bodley Head, London. Page 45-49.