

The Existential Dilemma of Characters: Dissecting Selected Short Stories of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract:

This research article is mainly focused on how the characters of R K Narayan present existential dilemma in their activities. Out of the Thirty two stories from the *Malgudi Days*, this article has thrown light on few characters in the following stories: *Forty-Five a month*, *Out of Business*, *The Martyr's Corner*, *Iswaran*, *Like the Sun*. By Using existential philosophy, these short stories are dissected in this article and characters are struggling for existence with their free choice. This research is qualitative research as the primary texts of R.K Narayan from “*Malgudi Days*” are interpreted from the existential point of views. The characters are in dilemma of existential struggle and freedom of choice. As a qualitative research, the researcher has purposively selected the stories and analyzed them from the light of Existential theory.

Key Words: Existence; anxiety; freedom of choice; absurdity; hope and struggle

Introduction

Every novelist gives us in his novels his/her own personal idiosyncratic vision of the world through his/her own experiences. Narayan, a famous Indian writer of many fictions, his novels is not a textual-philosophical exploration but an actual one. He does not raise the consciousness of his protagonist to a philosophical pitch that is evident in the novels of the contemporary writers of his times, i.e. Mulk Raj Anand's or Raja Rao's oeuvre.

The reality of Narayan's art is not textual but live experiences. Although he has restricted his

narratives to the self-imposed boundaries, one must realize that his novels are replete with characters who have their own individuality, identity and who enjoy the vagaries and vicissitudes of life against all odds.

Narayan's work can be characterized as being simple and undemanding. His stories and novels are laced with humour, irony, moral with a blend of Indian myths, motifs and legends. His writings reflect on his upbringing too. He has been highly influenced by his grandmother Parvati, under whose care he was nurtured during his formative years. His writings have encapsulated the Hindu myths and ideals. Here William Walsh's words are apt: "The religious sense of Indian myths is a part of Narayan's grip of his reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience." (1)

What one can say about Narayan is that he believes in the maxim: Experience is the best teacher. Human beings learn the lessons of life through their own experiences and they have a long lasting effect. They help one to mature and tackle the difficulties in life. The concept of freedom is not just confined to the realms of social and economic freedom. It is the freedom from mental makeup and emotional attitude, the need of the hour. They strive for freedom from sufferings and agonies. His characters belong to the middle class strata of life. He has attempted to show that his protagonists and other characters too not only go through physical suffering but also mental or psychological sufferings in life.

Adjacent study of Narayan's novels reveals that he has offered the woes and distress from various angles. The concept of self-alienation runs through the lives of his characters and they seek their identity, realize their self during their journey of life and thereby discover themselves. Thus they progress towards self-development. However the degree of sufferings may vary but one has to acknowledge and address them separately. In this context, Tabish Khair's views are as under:

One has to address the issue of alienation in the context of Narayan's writings because Narayan's Malgudi however delineated is still a literary construct made of bricks of observation joined together by the cement of occlusion. And such constructs are seldom, if ever, ideologically innocent formations. (2)

Narayan has hunted to give expression to those folks who fail to observe the very purpose behind life and the significance of his existence in this hostile world. They face existential predicaments and this creates feelings of anxiety in everyone. The nature of existence cannot be changed. But by developing a positive attitude towards these predicaments, Narayan through his fiction presents his characters creating a worthwhile existence by making choices responsibly and leading a meaningful life as these concerns are viewed as an inevitable part of the human condition and is a natural consequence of human existence.

Concepts of Existential Dilemma

Existential matters are as ancient as manhood. Merging the two strands of thoughts of existentialism and affirmative psychology, one can face any challenges or situations in life. What is important is not the challenges people come across but how people respond to them and with the right attitudes they are likely to overcome these challenges.

G. W. G. Hegel, a noted German philosopher of the 19th century is considered to be the first philosopher to present the term 'alienation' as an important philosophical concept. Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern man and it has a positive meaning. Sean Sayers thinks likewise and states: "Although alienation results in fragmentation of people, it also means that individuality, subject and freedom develop. It is a necessary stage in the process of self-development and self-realization." (3)

Individuality is the projection of self. Self-image casts and transforms self – identity. One's identity is rooted in the culture in which one lives and hence the alienation from the culture leads to the loss of one's socio-cultural identity. The individual's alienation from the society is the manifestation of his quest for the assertion of his identity. The identity of the person may be established on evidences. A person knows his identity by means of what John Locke calls it 'consciousness' and it is this consciousness that constitutes personal identity.

The problem of individual identity has a complexity in its different manifestations. Psychologists and philosophers come across the predicament of modern life and man and found in both traits of deep-rooted anxiety, alienation and absurdity.

M. K. Naik writes that Narayan is primarily preoccupied with man's filling of the life-role entrusted to him by tradition and environment. In Narayan's world human beings are strange indeed!! The following words reveal his power of thinking:

The impact of life, the material and substance of our thought are the same everywhere, in any state, traditionally Indian. In the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* the values remain the same in every village. A stage full of characters is presented by the narrator. His characters are limited in variety and simpler by nature. Hence the inhabitants of the fictional world are bound by the fact that they are human beings prone to commit errors. Even intelligent and precocious characters are shown to commit blunders because they are mortals. (4)

As David E. Cooper points out: "Value, in the special sense is something a person places not upon the actions and goals, which he authentically adopts, but upon those which he sees demand of him by others. The pursuit of these latter goals or values is then described as alienated." (5)

In most of Narayan's stories, the hero is almost the other. That may be religion, society, parents, husband, wife or lover. But the protagonist continues to draw his identity by reference to this other. The impact of the themes like the East-West encounter, marital discord, death, self-deception etc.

has penetrated deep in to the Indian ethos. The belief that the novelist of the pre-independence period to a larger extent dealt with the external climate and not the climate of the mind is not justifiable. However, it is far from truth to state that the Indian novelists did not deal with the crisis of identity. They are concerned not only with the milieu but also with their self-consciousness. The characters are encouraged to experience their life and particularly their relationships more deeply. Narayan in all his novels focuses on human relationships, their emotions, and their experience in life.

Malgudi, the fictional town of R. K. Narayan has characters whose existence is immortal and they have their kinship with all humanity. His approach to the subject matter is always marked by intellectual inspirations. His artistic excellence lies in his authentic explorations and straightforward manner. Narayan's novels are teemed with consciousness in human relationship. K. N. Sinha rightly observes: "R. K. Narayan is keenly aware of the fundamental irremediable incongruities which life and world are confronting us." (7)

We do find Narayan's characterization commendable. His novels are full of variety of characters. All kinds of characters, both fair and foul are present in his novels. The real greatness lies in the realistic presentation of the whims and fancies of the character, the ironic implication giving ample opportunity to present the fears, frustration, happiness, unhappiness defeat and triumphs of the middle class men and women. The element of conflict between the traditional values and modern outlook towards human relationship is clearly evident.

H. L. Williams has pointed out the presence of several aspects of alienation in the novels of R. K. Narayan as: "The young quarrel with the old, leave Malgudi for England or America, eat beef and many foreigners return to vex and haunt and cruelly or comically disturb the pools of Malgudi." (8)

Narayan analyses the condition of the alienated individual with social, psychological and philosophical insight. He explores the psychological implications of human behaviour. The malaise of the modern man has gone out of proportion and the need of the hour is to think positively and face the crisis boldly. He says that when a man comes to realize that he is solely responsible for his decisions and destiny, he feels unnerved.

In Kierkegaard calls it '*anguish in the face of freedom*', this situation to Sartre, "*freedom is absolute and a man can look inward.*" According to the existential theory, defying the reality with its sorrows, pain guilt, and loneliness offers "existential catharsis". This philosophy of existence strikes a profound note on the essentials of life which are the predicaments of human existence.

Narayan first created a small town of Malgudi, which provided a setting for all the novels and stories during his literary career of six decades. It is this search for the essentials and for a peaceful co-existence, his characters experiencing oneself the existential predicaments with grit and determination find a path--an existential way to self-discovery.

Narayan's fictional world addresses the existential concerns like lack of freedom, sense of loneliness and alienation- introspection-search for one's identity-self-realization in a subtle way. One cannot

overlook the development of majority of his protagonists; especially correspond outwardly to the existential of self-estrangement/alienation. (David Cooper). Angst, anxiety, alienation, etc. stems from the realization of one's existential freedom to a remarkable degree and it is a natural consequence of existence. In his stories, Narayan touches upon the emotions of the protagonists. They too assert their individuality and in search for their identity. They too experience conflict with the society and face crisis. Narayan aims to identify and enhance the human strengths and virtues that make life worth living for the individual development.

Fables of R.K. Narayan and their Existential Interpretation

Narayan enjoys writing a short story because it does not require a long consistent effort or a minutely worked out detail like a novel. He says that he cannot utilize his experiences in novels, as they are most of the time centralized on a major theme. The short story, he says affords a writer a welcome diversion from the hard work put in a novel. While unveiling his characters, he gives the reader an insight in to the character's mind and brings out the unrecognized pathos so often found in the common man.

He relied upon the living characters rather than the imaginary ones. His caricatures are real. In literature, a caricature is a description of a person using exaggeration of some characteristics and over simplification of others but is actually the depictions of real life people.

The cover page of the book of *Malgudi Days* has the illustrations of the rustic characters. His youngest brother R. K. Laxman, known for his distinct illustrations in several books, newspapers, also had illustrated for Malgudi stories in *The Hindu* in the beginning. He said in one of his interviews that he was the first one to listen to Narayan's stories. Narayan would ask him to read them and solicit for his opinion. R. K. Laxman's illustrations enriched and highlighted Narayan's characters.

The caricature of the people at the foot of the statue includes a street vendor, an old man and two others; they are engaged in conversation. Each story stands out for its simplicity, innocence and has captured the Indianness. His real greatness lies in his realistic presentation of the will, temperament and attitude of his characters. Even his use of irony does not distort the originality of his characters.

The term characterization was introduced in Mid-Nineteenth century. Aristotle promoted the primacy of plot over characters that are a plot driven narrative. Characterization is an essential ingredient of a story.

C. V. Venugopal observes and states about Narayan : "His success lies in individualizing his characters. "His strength of characterization lies rather in his thorough and close observation of life's little incidents, a healthy sense of humour ... and more than in his ability to bring a character to life with a few deft strokes of pen." (9)

Uma Parmeswaran argues: "There is no overwhelming moral communication communicated in his

stories. He is not passionately concerned with any social or spiritual ideal. He has no open-sesame password to salvation. He is seldom more than a story-teller." (10)

But Narayan has always focused on character. According to him if his personality comes alive, then the rest is easy for him. These are the words of Narayan and he is indeed a master of the art of characterization. He just records his observations with a rare artistic detachment. He does not give any moral views or personal views in his novels or stories. He grasps the psychological essence of his characters and probes into their minds.

Narayan's sense of irony, his deep religious sensibility, his humour, his consciousness of the significance of everyday occurrences, and his belief in a Hindu vision of life are all revealed in his stories. His characters pass through a crisis of spirit or circumstances. Almost invariably the central character faces some kind of crisis and resolves it or lives with it. Despite difficulties in life, his characters face them with fortitude.

He attaches great importance to human emotions and human relationships. Through his characters, he presents emotions like fear, frustration, failure, grief, guilt, anger etc; in his stories. In his stories even the beauty of the surroundings is evident. He has described a garden, a hut, marketplace, a cinema hall, or a wayward railway station in a lucid manner.

He draws a very vivid picture of the lives of those involved, be it a snake charmer, a domestic help, a celebrity singer, an astrologer, people travelling together in a railway coach or a pickpocket. During the war, Narayan did not publish any full-length novel except *The English Teacher*, which was autobiographical in nature. From 1939 to 1945, after his wife's death, Narayan had plunged in to despair. However, it is a mistake to think that the creative muse of Narayan was lying absolutely mute during those years. He contributed short stories to *The Hindu* and his own short-lived quarterly journal *Indian Thought*. He paints, objectively both sides of the picture and makes a thorough analysis of the characters that are erring mortals and essentially human beings. He accepts life as it is and covers a wide range that encompasses every aspect of life and every variety of character.

Out of the Thirty two stories from the *Malgudi Days*, I would like to throw light on few characters in the following stories: *Forty-Five a month*, *Out of Business*, *The Martyr's Corner*, *Iswaran*, *Like the Sun*.

The characterization in the following short stories is appropriate to the medium and we get a good glimpse into the lives of the people Narayan decides to talk about. He has presented various emotions through them.

Forty Five a Month

Forty Five a Month presents a picture of hope, anxiety, and despair of Shanta growing up without having any amenities and the simple pleasures of life. She gets excited and thrilled for her father has promised to take her to the cinema. Shanta becomes restless and is not able to stay in the class any longer. The day's activity comprises clay- modeling, music drill, writing alphabets and number.

She had completed everything. She was cutting the coloured paper and was losing her patience. She waited for the bell to ring and waited for the teacher to instruct them to go home. As soon as the teacher said, "Now you may all go home," or put away the scissors and take up your alphabets--- Shanta was impatient to know the time and asked her friend sitting next to her, Is it five now? "May be, she replied. Or is it six? "I don't think so, her friend replied because night comes at six. 'Do you think it is five? "Yes!" "Oh I must go. My father will be back at home now. He has asked me to be ready at five. He is taking me to the cinema this evening. I must go home. (MD p. 74)

With countless confidence Shanta runs home early and gets ready wearing her favourite dress. Her hope begins to dwindle as it gets dark. Tired of waiting for her father, she goes to sleep clinging to a ray of hope that at any moment he might come and take her out. Shanta's mother tells Venkat Rao when he comes home late: "She wouldn't even change her frock thinking that any moment you might be coming and taking her out. She hardly ate any food and wouldn't lie down for fear of crumpling her dress."(MD79) Shanta's anxiety and unhappiness is revealed here.

Out of Business

Rama Rao, in the story *Out of Business*, suddenly found himself on the streets when the gramophone company collapsed in which he was working. His family adopted various measures to be economical. They sacrificed their luxuries which they had enjoyed once upon a time. He sent out a dozen applications a day and wore his feet out looking for employment. His frustrations were at the peak is revealed in the following narration:

He sent his card in and asked. 'I wonder sir', if you could do something for me. My business is all gone through no fault of my own. I shall be grateful if you can give me something to do in your office ... What a pity Rama Rao! I am awfully sorry, there is nothing at present. If there is an opportunity I will certainly remember you. (MD 81)

Rama Rao lay in bed and spends restless nights. His only source of income was the rent they were receiving for their house. He came across the journal 'The Captain' and would solve the crossword puzzle week after week but it proved futile. In *despair*, one fateful day he realized that there is no going back. He would end his life. All the losses, frustration, disappointments of his life came down on him with renewed force. He felt that life is not worth living. Wife, children... nothing mattered. He lay across the lines. But to his dismay, not a single train passed that way. He discovered that a goods train had derailed. He went back to his wife who was waiting for him anxiously... He realized that God had been merciful to him. He learnt a lesson. He decided to face the ups and downs in life with fortitude and decided to never to give up hope.

The Martyr's Corner

The Martyr's corner emulates the upsurge and reduction in the affluences of the food vendor Rama. He sells food on a street corner that is strategically located. The business is good and husband and wife live in perfect harmony. He has a steady clientele but one day riots erupt in his corner of the

world and change the life for him and his wife forever. His food was so good that even a confirmed dyspeptic could not pass by without throwing a look at his 'assortment of edibles' and feel the taste of it. He became popular in no time. Cinema crowd formed the biggest part of his clientage. He made a good profit every day. But such security is unattainable in human life.

One night hasty, a babbling crowd gathered at the popular corner. There was a quarrel and fighting over something. It became a political issue. The police intervened and opened fire. Many people died. The 'spot' was cordoned off. People collected enough money to set up a stone memorial and decorated it with ornamental fencing and flowerpots. It became a Martyr's corner'. Rama's business was finished. At times, external circumstances overturn previously happy lives and characters are not in control of their destiny. Such insecurity is encountered in human life. Rama is forced to become a waiter when his life starts on a downward spiral after his "old spot" was taken up by a statue. The character is so universal that one could even identify a person like Rama struggling to survive in this bad world.

Once a hotel owner himself he had to line up for a job outside a restaurant. It is indeed a change of fortune. In this story there is pathos and it also showed that in the present society politicians do veil their power overnight and the poor bear the brunt of their threat and corrupt practices. 'The health officer no doubt came and said, "You must put all this under a glass lid, otherwise I shall destroy it all someday...Take care!" (MD 114)

Iswaran

In India, we seem to have very little tolerance for failure. A carefree college student, who after repeated attempts in the story, flunks his 12th board examination for the tenth time. He wanted to continue but his parents lost all interest in his examination. Though he bragged about outwardly but inwardly he was a desperado. He was longing and praying for success. He felt that fate seem to have isolated him from his fellow-beings in every respect. He was in a state of **depression** and was extremely unhappy. He watched the same film twice just to be away from this bitter world. The first time he saw he was lost in that film world. Second time when he saw, he knew that all the boys who had come to celebrate their success would rag him, ridicule him and would have mirthful faces the moment the lights went up. He was thoroughly dejected. He desperately thought of a solution. He writes a suicide note to his father before proceeding to the river to drown himself. The following thought, which came in to the mind of, this youngster is as follows: "I am not fit to live. A fellow who cannot pass an examination..." (MD p. 48)

He had not even checked his results at the Senate House. He decides to check his result on his way to the Sarayu River. He discovers that he has passed with a second class. He goes insane at the shock of joy and does not believe in himself. The ironic double twist in the story leaves the reader shell-shocked. This story rings true for many youngsters in India even today.

Like the Sun

Sekhar, a geography teacher of the school is thinking about Truth. He feels that truth is like the Sun.

Just like one cannot look directly at the Sun, one cannot look into one's eyes if he is not telling the truth. He realizes that morning that the essence of human relationship consists in fortifying truth. He decides to spend at least one day telling only the truth. He feels life is not worth living if one does not set apart a unique day for telling truth. He tells his wife that the breakfast she has made is not good. One of the teachers in his school informs him that some common friend they know had died. Sekhar does not feel sad and bluntly responds to him that the man was selfish and mean. The headmaster invites Sekhar to his house. He knows that Sekhar has a good taste in music and he wants Sekhar to listen to his singing. Here, the headmaster actually seeks for an identity. He always desired to have good vocal chords to be given by God. The following words reveal his desperation: "Rather a surprise for you isn't it? Asked the headmaster. "I've spent a fortune on it behind closed doors.... God hasn't given me a child but at least let him not deny me the consolation of music." (12)

Sekhar listens to the headmaster sing. His head throbs with the medley of sounds blasting into his ear-drums. The singing is terrible and he is afraid to tell the truth. If he tells, he may be removed out from his job as he remembers that he will only tell the truth that day. In return, the headmaster tells Sekhar that he can have extra time to grade some test papers.

The headmaster asks Sekhar his opinion. Sekhar asks him if he can permit him to answer that question the next day. The headmaster insists that he gives his frank opinion immediately. Sekhar tells him that his singing is not good. The headmaster appreciates him for being honest and he is glad that he that he does not have to pay the music teacher but he tells Sekhar to handover hundred papers after checking. He warns him that it will be scrutinized by him. Narayan has linked irony with human psychology. It is rightly said by Hillaire Belloc: "It is the nature of irony that it should avenge the truth....Irony has the quality about it that like some fiery sword it cannot be used with any propriety save in God's purpose." (13)

Although R.K. Narayan delineates the cruel circumstances of life in India, he portrays individuals with remarkable resilience to triumph over every adversity. All forms of social injustice: discrimination, prejudice, etc are highlighted. Yet the human spirit conquers everything. His short stories were adapted by the late actor-director Shankar Nag in to a television series, bearing the same name *Malgudi Days*. It was shot in the village of Agumbe in Karnataka. The stories of children written by him exemplify the truth .They see all that the adults do which they are forbidden to do. They are keen observers and they emulate them. Hence, Narayan conveys this message that children should be treated normally and given their individuality and adults should correct each other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clearly presented the five types of existential angsts, the protagonists in each of Narayan's short stories face which are the recurrent themes of human existence. The predicaments, the inner conflict intensifies as the stories progresses. The characters in the short stories go through an existential crisis. He possesses a rare psychological insight into the human mind and has a mastery over the inner lives of the characters. He brilliantly portrays every character tackling the inevitable vicissitudes of life and very subtly evinces that these existential situations are essential

for human flourishing.

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