

Ethnic Aspects of Familial Relationships in the Select Novels of R.K.Narayan

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Abstract: Today, we live in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized due to the unprecedented technological developments and economic compulsions. We call this world a ‘global village’ and each one of us a ‘global citizen’. In spite of this, a cursory observation would reveal the fact that people, either as individuals or as groups, have retained their ‘ethnic’ character. This probably can be attributed to people’s craving for individuality and individual identity or as a revolt against the forces of technology that is trying to create a ‘homogenized’ world. Undoubtedly, ‘ethnicity’ gives people a sense of pride and recognition. Sociologists also agree that it is this ethnic character of communities that makes the world an interesting place to live in. Ethnicity has been understood as “a social construct that indicates identification with a particular group which is often descended from common ancestors. Members of the group share common cultural traits such as language, religion, customs, and beliefs and are an identifiable minority within the larger nation state.(Eriksen 14)It is in this context, that the present study of aspects of ethnicity in the select novels of R K Narayan becomes relevant. An attempt is made in this paper to relate the concept of ethnic family relationships portrayed in the novels of R.K.Narayan in order to establish the fact that Narayan’s novels and its characters portray ethnic characteristics in its most potent form. This study of ethnic aspects in R.K.Narayan’s select novels is with respect to the South Indian Tamil Hindu ethnic group. The scope of the study is with respect to family relationships. The picture that emerges from the above study points to the important role that ethnicity has in projecting the values of a society. . The reason for the focus on the South Indian Hindu Society is that its culture and religion are to a great extent in its pristine glory unlike that in other parts of India where the impact of the foreign invasion is glaring

Key words: South Indian Tamil Hindu society (SITH), ethnic, human relationship, family relationship, tradition.

Date of Submission: 06-03-2020

Date of Acceptance: 20-04-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

The novels of R.K.Narayan have invited criticisms and reviews by hundreds of critics and reviewers over the years. The fact that it continues to attract keen interest from researchers in unraveling and interpreting the merits and weaknesses of Narayan’s work, is a proof of its endearing value as also the greatness of this writer. In the past, critics have been focusing on the plot, characterization, narrative technique, theme, and philosophy in R.K. Narayan’s novels. These have been published either as individual texts or as a collection or series. The themes of Indianness, social relationship, culture and religion have been dealt with frequently.. Narayan, more than any other writer, is a regional novelist, steeped in the tradition of South Indian Tamil Hindu (SITH) Culture and its values. Very few writers of Indo-Anglian Literature have brought in the regional flavour to the extent that Narayan has done in his novels. No writer has treated all the aspects under a single canvas in the theme of ethnicity. The present paper focuses on the ethnic character of familial relationships in the society that Narayan writes about.

Ethnic Feature in Family Relationships

Every form of writing, be it prose or poetry, would be rooted in a larger societal context from which the author of the work hails or chooses to portray. A writer’s inspiration is drawn from the society in which he lives. He is often described as holding a mirror to the life and society of his time. Thus, society’s influence is bound to be reflected in the works of a writer either consciously or sub-consciously make it possible for them to live together. The society portrayed in Narayan’s novels, is that of the South Indian Tamil Hindu (SITH) society, which is truly Indian in character. In the words of Narasimhiah (68), “portraying such a society was

possible for Narayan because he was in the heart of South India, brought up in an orthodox family, spoke Tamil at home and Kannada in the street, and learnt English mostly from Indian teachers". In the novels are middle class. But then it is true everywhere. The ethnic character of Malgudi society is that it is essentially SITH. . Narayan's novels deal with human concerns and human relationships. Familial relationships such as husband-wife, parent-child, and extended family relationships make interesting study. For the present study, the types of human relationships selected are those that partake of the unique features of the ethnic group :husband-wife, and parent-child relationships. In the portrayal of these relationships Narayan pictures both the ideal and the actual that prevail in this ethnic community

Familial Relationships

In its widest sense family "refers to a group of people who think of themselves as belonging to a separate group in society and who are related to one another by ties of either blood or marriage; the family mediates between the individual and the society, helping him to take his place in the wider world" (Broom and Selznick 26). The authors also discuss nuclear family and the extended family. The nuclear family, the authors write, must have at sometime in it a father, mother, and at least one child. The authors define the extended family which is also called consanguine family to include in it a nuclear family structure. In an interview, Narayan stresses the importance of family: "One's family saves one from too much alienation and too much time to brood."(1983:184).The orient and the occident are different in their approach to family life. While to most Westerners, a family ends up with a single circle consisting of father, mother, and children, in India in general and among the SITH society in particular, family represents a wider circle consisting of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and the like. Even in-laws are considered part of a family. That each (family) member is identified through a relationship is proof of the importance given to these members in the ethnic community under study. Nomenclatures vary for elder and younger male and female siblings, paternal and maternal aunts and uncles, male and female cousins, and so on.

Husband-Wife Relationship

Among the family relationships, the most intimate and important one is that of the husband-wife relationship. Thiruvalluvar, the ancient Tamil poet writes on the virtues of a husband-wife relationship. The couplet when translated means:

Of all who strive for bliss, the great
Is he who leads the married state (Thirukkural, 47)

The concept of husband-wife relationship in an Indian context is different compared to the Western concept of love and romance. Narayan makes an interesting observation about marriage and husband-wife relationship: "We believe that the fitness of match not to be gauged by letting them go through a period of courtship but by the study of the horoscopes; boy and girl meet and love after marriage rather than before" (Narayan, 1965:122). Indians believe that marriages are made in heaven and among the SITH society, the suitability for a marriage is decided not on the basis of love between a man and a woman but on several other considerations such as matching of horoscopes, caste, sects, sub-sects, family status, and the like. Therefore they are mostly arranged marriages. In most novels of Narayan, in the treatment of husband-wife relationship, the actual is set against the ideal, except in **Swami and Friends**, **The English Teacher**, and part of **Grandmother's Tale** where an ideal husband-wife relationship is portrayed. In all other novels under study, this relationship points to marital discord, as in Ramani and Savithri in **The Dark Room**, the headmaster and his wife in **The English Teacher**, Margayya and his wife in **The Financial Expert**, Marco and Rosie in **The Guide**, Jagan and Ambika in **The Vendor of Sweets**, Swamiji and his wife in **A Tiger for Malgudi**, and Vishwa and Bala in the first half of **Grandmother's Tale**. By focusing on the marital disharmony, the author obliquely hints at an ideal husband-wife relationship according to Hindu tradition. Narayan's male protagonists except Krishna, aim at a relationship that expects implicit devotion and subjugation from their wives.

Swami and Friends portrays an extended family with perfect marital harmony though the focus is on the little boy Swami. In contrast to this, **The Dark Room** portrays a family that is the least appealing one. It describes a disintegrating family, where the children are not emotionally attached to the father. Savithri, wife of Ramani, belongs to the middle class, not highly educated and is burdened by social compulsions to stay with her authoritarian and assertive husband who is self-opinionated, arrogant with an exaggerated self-esteem. Savithri and her children can sense his frequent mood swings even before he steps into the house. Whenever Ramani loses his temper and abuses her and the children, she goes into the 'dark room'. Savithri ethnically conforms to the idea of a wife's place in her house according to the Hindu tradition. Implicit obedience to one's husband was an ideal quality in a wife, half a century back. Savithri's life will make a suitable case study for feminist activists who will find a middle class mind set in Savithri.

If **The Dark Room** presented a picture of domestic disharmony, **The English Teacher** presents a vivid and charming portrait of domestic felicity. As Narayan himself writes in his 'My Days', "That book (**The English Teacher**) falls in two parts – one is the domestic life and the other half is spiritual" (220). The first half is about Krishna's blossoming love for his wife Susila and their child. There is a blend of the lyric and domestic, the one in its pure intensity, the other in its sober ordinariness. The love of Krishna deepens and intensifies in the midst of household chores, prudent house-keeping, religious ceremonies, family disruptions, simple pleasures like visiting a cinema or shopping. Susila has the strength of a girl brought up in a traditional loving family with exquisite manners and deference to her husband. She possesses that serenity and calm characteristic of a balanced Indian wife.

Before Susila joined her husband, Krishna felt a sense of something missing in his life. Here the family becomes the centre of all his concerns. Mamarete (38) writes, "As the poet of Indian domestic life in this novel, Narayan begins celebrating the place of the home in Indian society by portraying Krishna, henceforth ill-at-ease in the hostel, sets up his home to enjoy domestic bliss. Krishna's jasmine scented home soon becomes a reality with the arrival of his family". In his account of the reunion of Krishna with his wife and child at the Malgudi station, Narayan goes for what is ethnically accepted behaviour by underplaying the husband-wife reunion, the typical SITH tradition of not being publicly demonstrative on matters of love.

"The relationship between Krishna and Susila is one of the most delicately etched ones in Narayan's novels", observes Holmstrom (1973:105). Iyengar (366) describes the married life of Krishna and his wife as a 'prose lyric' in which Narayan has lavished his best gifts as a writer. A tradition that gives a very high priority to husband-wife loyalty and integrity and frowns at divorces also advises a quick remarriage in the event of the wife dying. In **The English Teacher**, after Susila's death, when Krishna is at the bus station with Leela to see his mother off, a co-passenger expresses her sympathy for the motherless child and argues, "A man must marry within fifteen days of losing his wife, otherwise he will be ruined. I was the fourth wife to my husband when he always married within three weeks." (99) In the age of arranged marriages, such things were plausible and were considered to be a necessity to preserve the family as a unit in the ethnic society of SITH.

The domestic scene in **The Financial Expert** is that of a material world and is the least romantic. The picture that Narayan gives of Margayya's family is true to South Indian Hindu tradition. On many occasions, one finds Margayya's opinion of his wife and his attitude towards her as husband does not differ much from Ramani of **The Dark Room** in his arrogance and scorn. But while Ramani feels proud of his charming wife as his possession, Margayya is ashamed of his wife's dowdiness. Nevertheless, he does entertain tender feelings towards her unlike Ramani. However, Margayya seems to be pleased at the thought that she cared for him. At the same time his wife is pragmatic and not inclined to sentimentalism.

The husband-wife relationship in **The Guide** belongs to the unconventional type, bordering on profanity. Rosie and Marco are ill matched. Marco is a queer man devoid of any human warmth. His only enthusiasm is for collecting and annotating ancient art. Rosie's beauty dazzles Raju at the very first sight and later in the story he curses the day he met her at Malgudi station, that day which was the beginning of all his troubles. Rosie's married life with Marco is a total failure. She leaves Marco and starts her life afresh with Raju. This is the most unconventional act according to Hindu values. Raju's mother seriously objects to this arrangement. According to her, he was committing a sin by running away with a married woman.

A similar kind of shock is expressed by Jagan in **The Vendor of Sweets** when he discovers that the woman brought home by his son Mali is not married to him. Jagan cannot rest in peace till she is packed off to America. In **A Tiger for Malgudi**, the Swamiji leaves home discontented with his family life. Here, he acts according to the tenets of Hindu ethics by embracing *Sanyasa*. His wife, a shrew and a nag comes pleading to him to go back asserting her rights as a wife, but he refuses.

The captain's wife Rita goes a step further and ends her life when the captain is mauled by the tiger. Though they never saw eye to eye in any matter, and spent their life in arguments, the spark of true love was always in their hearts. ;, though his death was sudden, with his last flicker of consciousness he worried about his wife and how she was going to manage without him.

In **A Tiger for Malgudi**, the husband turns into a *Sanyasi* and leaves home. It is a different story in **Grandmother's Tales**. In both, the husbands play truant and the wives plead for their conjugal rights. In the former, the husband refuses to go back home, in the latter the husband is brought back by his wife through fair and fowl means, and the husband far from becoming a *Sanyasi*, is thrice married. In all these novels the basic principle remains the same: the importance given to the institutions of marriage and the ways of guarding and preserving husband-wife relationship and family at any cost which is its ethnic character.

In the words of the Swamiji in **A Tiger for Malgudi** "Human ties cannot be defined in black and white terms. There can be no such thing as unmitigated hatred and unmitigated love. Those who are deeply attached sometimes deliberately present a rough exterior, and that is also one way of enjoying the married state. Some wives in this world show their deepest love only by nagging, and the husbands also enjoy putting on the air of being victims." (69)

Parent-Child Relationship

In a culture where family bonds are very strong, parent-child relationship assumes significance. Indian legends, epics and scriptures have glorified the parent-child relationship in a myriad ways. In a SITH context, parent-child bondage goes beyond the stage of childhood as the Indian family is basically an extended family. An emotional bond exists between son/daughter and parents even after the children grow up, get married and have their own children. Parents have a say in all matters at every stage of the child's growing – education, marriage, bringing up their grandchildren and so on. This, sometimes, leads to family discords and ego problems which are perennial themes in all Indian fictions. A foreigner would be aghast to find that it is the parents who decide on when and to whom their children should marry! In the SITH society a daughter's duty to her parents lasts only till she is married; the duties of a son to his parents is endless and this has been put down in great detail in the Hindu Sastras. It is the bounden duty of a son to share his parents' responsibilities not only when they are alive but also after their death through performing certain rituals to appease the departed souls. Narayan's treatment of this relationship is authentically ethnic in character. In a traditional Hindu household, fathers are more dreaded than loved by their children whereas the mothers are more accessible and understanding. In his treatment of parent-child relationship, Narayan adopts a more traditional approach than his contemporaries and any conflict on the part of a son/daughter is treated as a rebellion. Two kinds of parent-child relationships are discussed in this section, father-child and mother-child.

In **The Dark Room**, Ramani is an arrogant self-centered tyrannical father who has no genuine love or affection for his three children. He is harsh and ill tempered and expects absolute obedience from his children.

Between Krishna and his daughter Leela in **The English Teacher**, the relationship is one of the most poignant ever expressed in literature. After Susila's death, Krishna played a double role – that is of a mother and a father. He refused to allow her to be taken away by her grandparents.

In both '**The Financial Expert**' and **The Vendor of Sweets**, Margayya and Jagan love their sons to the point of weakness and are disillusioned in the end. But they come out of this disappointment all the wiser. Margayya is torn between love for his son on the one hand and exasperation on his incessant demands on the other.

There is a confused mixture of love and helplessness that is the result of paternal concern. In **The Vendor of Sweets**, Jagan is drawn between conflicting emotions of paternal love and moral principles. Like Margayya, Jagan too spoiled his son by being too indulgent. As Mali grew up, he was insensitive to his father's feelings and incomprehensible about his motives and assumptions quite beyond Jagan's grasp.

Both Raju's mother and Jagan are motivated by traditional values. Narayan perhaps wants to point out the necessity of preserving the rich traditions and moral values. Jagan's concern with both is so great that he does not hesitate to sacrifice his paternal duty.

The second type is the mother-child relationship. The concept of motherhood and mother-child relationship is a much glorified theme in Indian literature in general and Tamil literature in particular. There are very few ethnic communities in the world which give the concept of motherhood so noble and exalted a place. Generally, Narayan's is a man's world and the mother figures do not have a pivotal role to play except in **The Dark Room** and **Grandmother's Tales**.

In the first novel **The Dark Room**, the protagonist Savithri's part is analysed by some critics more as a wife abused, cheated and insulted than as a mother who swallows her pride and takes the bitterest decision of coming back home for the sake of her children. Jha (110) views it differently. He remarks: "It would be relevant here to analyze this novel not merely as a wife's struggle against the infidelity of her husband, but also as a mother's struggle to protect her children against a callous father of them. What was this foolish yearning for children, this dragging attachment?" As days pass by the yearning intensifies "I must see them; I must see Babu, I must see Sumathi, and I must see Kamala." (146). When she decided to return home, it is not for her husband but for the sake of her children. Savithri's return home is not a defeat for her. It is a victory for every mother of her kind.

For Krishna whose world had crumbled after Susila's death, his mother's support was a consolation. In **The Guide**, Raju's mother wants to protect him from evil outside. Raju is her world. She had always been a refuge to him when his father occasionally went into a fit of anger. Her presence gave Raju comfort and solace. When Raju is put in the prison on charges of forgery, his mother weeps bitterly; her tears are not for what Raju has done. As a traditional woman, she is shocked beyond measure that her son has brought so much of disgrace to the family. And about this, Jha (113) says, "This is the climax of the preserver's role of mother in Narayan. When Savithri fails to preserve the sanctity of domestic life, she leaves her home but here Raju's mother prefers death to disgrace". Like Jagan in **The Vendor of Sweets**, Raju's mother has to live with the pains of the son's disregard for her. Narayan once again upholds the age-old Indian traditions and values.

II. CONCLUSION

Human relationships have multiple dimensions. All civilized nations are guided by ethics and laws framed to regulate the society, and the family unit is common to all. One may find a distressingly disintegrating society in the present age but it is still honoured in most societies in the world because it promotes and nurtures love, tolerance, compassion and sacrifice, all of which are noble virtues to practice. Institution of marriage followed by a family and relationships like husband-wife, parent-child and other relations are still recognized world over though Western standards of a family are different. But parental instincts, compassion, hatred and jealousy are common human emotions. This paper has examined in detail familial relationships in its various aspects. According to Narayan (1989: 234) "human relationships make one's existence worthwhile Narayan says he wrote about what interested him most. That was, human beings and human relationships; improving society was not his aim". True to his character, Narayan has made telling portrayals of human relationships in his novels. Though the concept of family is universal, Narayan has clearly brought out the ethnic characteristics of the SITH family system through his novels. Aspects of husband-wife and parent-child relationships are portrayed in their quintessential ethnic form,

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Dr. R. Pushkala. "Ethnic Aspects of Familial Relationships in the Select Novels of R.K.Narayan." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(4), 2020, pp. 23-27.