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Indianness in R. K. Narayan's Novel
The Man-Eater of Malgudi

Susan Nirmala S., M.A., M.Phil.

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R. K. Narayan

The Indo-Anglian Novel

Today a good number of Indians use the English language to express their experience of life. Their writings have developed into a substantial literature and are referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. The term *Indian English literature* is also used to refer to this fast growing body of literature which is written by Indians using English as their second language in most cases.

The Growth of the Indian Novel in English

With the introduction of English in India, a number of English Classics were translated into various Indian languages and Indian writers were inspired by these translations. Some of these writers also wrote their creative works in English. Despite its late start, the novel writing in English by Indian writers has gone far ahead of poetry both in quantity and quality. It was with the Gandhian struggle for freedom that the Indo-Anglian novel

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really came into its own. The ideals of the Indian freedom struggle were reflected in the earlier novels written by Indians.

The unique intricacies of Indian social life and the untranslatable nuances of Indian conversational speech are better rendered through the medium of one's mother tongue than through a foreign language. But the Indian novelists writing in English have overcome this insurmountable hurdle. Novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharaya, Kamala Markandaya and R.K. Narayan and others have considerably enriched Indo-Anglian fiction by producing works of high standard.

Right to Creativity through English

Indo-Anglian writers have defended their right to use English and have created for themselves a niche among a class of readers, who seem to enjoy reading Indian fiction written in English.

Visualizing English defending itself before an Indian judge against the charge that it was the language of foreign oppressors and should now return to its own country, R. K. Narayan makes the language declare,

“You probably picture me as a trident bearing Rule Britannia, but actually I am a devotee of goddess Saraswati. I have been her steadfast handmaid”
(*A Writer's Nightmare*, 16)

Narayan defends the status of the English language in India. In ‘To A Hindi Enthusiast’, Narayan writes:

For me, at any rate, English is an absolutely Swadeshi language... It has sojourned in India longer than you or I and is entitled to be treated with respect. It is my hope that English will soon be classified as a non-regional Indian language. (40-41)

An Indian Writer of Indian Fiction with International Audience

R. K. Narayan is widely regarded as India's greatest writer in English. He has gained international reputation even among the readers in England and the USA, whose native language is English. R. K. Narayan had an ability to make the rhythm and intricacies of Indian life accessible to people of other cultures.

Narayan's English

Narayan wrote all his novels in a type of English which is peculiar to him with a distinct Indian colouring. He has written 15 novels and scores of short stories. While many Indo-Anglian novelists his generation had the tendency to preach, to sermonize, to advise and

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to convert their readers, Narayan wrote art for art's sake. In each of his novels he has presented a slice of life as he saw it, with colourful description.

English Poses Only Small Problems in Reading Narayan's Novels

Perhaps the most startling discovery in reading a Narayan novel is that language poses such a small problem. Simplicity and clarity are the keynotes to his style. Narayan's language as reflected in his English belongs to the everyday world of ordinary people. It is the "language" in which the average Malgudians dream, love and indulge in their small wars, laugh and lament. His style gives the distinct impression of a small South Indian community confined to a particular setting, their manners and musings, conversations and thoughts and instinctive reaction to things.

Narayan hardly needs a glossary to give an explanation of the words and phrases that he has used in his novels. Where he writes specifically of Indian customs or objects as he often does, no western, for that matter, non-South Indian reader will ever find it difficult to understand. No use is made of variations in accent or wrong usage of the many Indianisms that Narayan, as much as anyone else, could have heard on all sides in every part of the country. The significant fact is that while all his characters speak English, Narayan manages to express through this rather colourless medium of his, not only the general Indian sensibility but a whole range of characters, personality and temperament within it.

Narayan takes advantage of the fact that our level of passive language skills (listening and reading) in English has always been superior to our active language skills (speaking and writing).

I Sentence Patterns Used in the Novel

Narayan's language is so simple and bare that one does not feel it to be a foreign language. Most of his readers are second language users of English and thus are equipped mostly with limited vocabulary and limited patterns of sentences. Most of the sentences are simple ones. Narayan does not make use of highly complicated sentences.

Below are given the different sentence patterns used by Narayan in the novel under study *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

1.1 Simple Sentences

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1) I wish to see you for a minute. | (page 79) |
| 2) The child will love it. | (152) |
| 3) He eyed my coloured labels. | (16) |

1.2 Compound Sentences

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- 1) My tone interested Babu and he looked up expectantly. (20)
- 2) It was about one O clock and the sands were hot. (92)
- 3) He was a master and he taught me the art. (17)

1.3 Complex sentences

- 1) As soon as he entered by the curtain, instead of handling me the proof and disappearing, he stood arrested for a minute staring at the old man. (71)
- 2) Invariably, in deference to his literary attainments, I let him occupy the Queen Anne Chair, while I sat perched on the edge of my roll top desk. (8)
- 3) I did not mind tarrying to listen to the old man, although my fingers felt cramped with encircling the wad of wet clothes I was carrying home to dry. (10)

1.4 Transformed Sentences

- Active: Sastri had fixed everything. (15)
- Passive: The floor was littered with pieces of waste paper. (25)

II New Construction of Words

In the following sentences, the association of words may be noted:

- 1)..... but when one or other of the cartmen turned round with a frown or a swear-word, he was delighted... (102)
- 2) I meant those chair fixtures in your press. (103)
- 3) The dog sources were drying up. (83)

‘Swear-word’ is a compound word which is used in the sense of abusing someone in India using Indian languages, and it is a word which is not found in British English. The words ‘chair fixtures’ as in sentence (2) and ‘dog sources’ as in sentence (3) are not usually placed in British English.

III Words of Indian Origin used in the novel

R.K. Narayan’s ‘Indianism’ includes words some of which have already become part of the vocabulary of the English language like *saree*, or *sari* and some other words which are on their way to become a part of the English language like *Deepavali*, *ahimsa*, etc. The novelist has used many Indian words in his novel and most of these are listed down.

Deepavali	(7)
Sari	(7)
Paisa	(7)
Taluk	(9)
Pyol	(12)

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Dhoti	(10)
Ramayana	(12)
Puja	(13)
Satyanarayana puja	(14)
Phaelwan	(18)
Seer	(18)
Appa	(19)
Jutka	(24)
Bhagavat gita	(30)
Upanishads	(30)
Beedi	(44)
Khadi	(47)
Garuda	(53)
Kavi	(55)
Idli	(70)
Rakshasa	(75)
Puranas	(76)
Asura	(87)
Namaskaram	(87)
Jibba	(88)
Ahimsa	(92)
Radhakalyan	(103)
Dharma	(121)
Pulav	(123)
Pandal	(126)
Melas	(149)
Kumba mela	(149)
Mami	(153)
Lungi	(168)

With the increasing popularity of Indian literature in English, ‘saree’ the dress of the female and ‘dhoti’, the garment of the male are progressively used and accepted as such.

History, Nature and Function of English Help Narayan

Words from other languages find their way into English when English speakers encounter cultures for whose specialties English does not have equivalent expressions. Several centuries of British colonial rule made it possible for closer contacts between English speakers and speakers of other languages. Colonial administrative and legal exigencies and the rulers’ simple day to day existential needs demanded adoption of words and expressions from other languages into English. In addition, English is unusually endowed with a historical facility of absorbing foreign words into its native structure.

Thirumalai 2002 reports, for example,
(<http://www.languageinindia.com/april2002/tesolbook.html#chapter1>)

An important characteristic of English has been its receptivity to loan words from other languages. No other language exhibits such an extraordinary receptivity. This has not resulted, however, in the loss of corresponding native words in most cases. Words were often borrowed to refine the meanings which resulted in greater clarity in the expression and creation of ideas.

Moreover, English speakers always enjoyed greater freedom in the use of their language, unlike, for instance, the users of the French language. There has been no legal provision which guided the native speakers of English in the use or non-use of words. Mostly the commonly agreed conventions, rather than deliberate enforcement of rules of usage through academies, marked the development of English and its use.

Modern, current English has over 500,000 words. If we add the scientific terms used in the language, the total would be very high indeed. It has been estimated that only 18.4 percent of these words is native to English. French vocabulary used in English is around 32.4 percent, whereas the words of Latin origin is estimated to be 14.4 percent, words of Greek origin around 12.5 percent, and other languages 23.3 percent. This does not mean that the words of foreign origin are more greatly used in English. It only suggests that more foreign words than the native ones are used to characterize, define, and describe meanings and ideas in English (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Culture Words

The words used in Narayan's novels are so deep rooted in the Indian culture, religion, philosophy etc, that they are part of the Indian psyche. The counter-parts in English if any, simply fail to realize the same images or arouse the same emotions because the word has behind it a whole multi-dimensional meaning gathered over the years. For example the word 'namaskaram' (87) is a greeting of salutation, which is also a gesture specific to Indian culture. And thus Narayan ultimately succeeds in using his clever blend of Indian words interspersed with the regular narrative without creating any jarring effect.

IV Collocations

The process of Indianization of the English language has formally resulted in the transfer of context and form and also the adoption and incorporation of Indian collocations. By

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Indian collocations are meant those formations which are contextually Indian, and which are uncommon in British English. In both cases there is deviation from the norm.

These formations are those which function in Indian English contextually, but would perhaps be unintelligible to a native speaker of English only because he is not acquainted with the Indian contexts of culture.

Some examples of such formations in the novel are

- 1) Tear-off calendar (19)
- 2) Cattle lifting cases (45)
- 3) Rice cake (131)
- 4) Sweet rice (136)
- 5) Hallo-saying stage (77)

The above sayings are translations of corresponding sayings in the Tamil language used by the Tamilians colloquially. R.K. Narayan has translated these sayings in his novel into some sort of Indian English expressions, and these may be understood with the understanding of the culture.

Indianness through the Use of the Bhasmasura Myth in the Novel

The use of myth in literature is significant for its quality of timelessness. Whether they are literary or are in the form of legends, myths illustrate abstract story patterns. Narayan is well versed in the Hindu epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and other Hindu scriptures and also in the myths and legends which form a part of the Indian folklore. Reference and allusions to such myths and legends abound in his stories. This also contributes to the Indianness in his novels.

In *The Man-eater of Malgudi* he has consciously used myth as a technique in the manner of such modern English writers as T. S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and others.

The Novel as a Recreation of a Hindu Myth

The Man-eater of Malgudi is at once a re-creation of the old Hindu myth of Bhasmasura in modern form. The Bhasmasura parallel is clearly indicated in the novel, in more than one place by Sastri, who tells Nataraj the narrator, less than half way through the story that Vasu “shows all the definitions of a rakshasa -- a demonic creature who possessed enormous strength, strange powers and genius but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God.” (95)

Adoption of the Physical and Cognitive Features of Rakshasa

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Vasu's very appearance is rakshasa-like. "A large man about six feet tall" he has a 'bull neck' a 'tanned face' a 'hammer fist', large powerful eyebrows, a large forehead, a shock of unkempt hair, 'like a black halo'. His clothes, loud and gaudy, are all of a piece with his appearance; so is his vehicle, a jeep which he drives at break neck speed. Nataraj aptly describes him as 'the prince of darkness' (163).

His movements are as mysterious as his activities in the jungle. He is a taxidermist (a profession that clearly puts him in the category of those outside the range of caste hierarchy according to ancient Hindu scriptures) and his room is filled with a strong stench of rotting flesh and hides being cured. Vasu, appropriately nick-named, 'man-eater' by Nataraj, has the strength of a rakshasa also, illustrated clearly by the story of his training under the 'pahelwan' (18). His diet then consisted of one hundred almonds every morning, with half a seer of milk, and six eggs with honey, followed by chicken and rice for lunch and vegetables and fruits at night.

His feats of strength included splintering a three-inch panel of seasoned teak with his fist, snapping chains, twisting iron bars and pulverizing granite. Later in the story he breaks his bedstead with a single blow of his fist, dislocates the wrist of the policeman with a single strike and kills himself when he hits himself on the temple to crush a mosquito.

Vasu does not only have a rakshasa's strength, he uses it like a rakshasa. Boorish and unmannerly, rude and aggressive, he bullies and browbeats people, "I challenge any man to contradict me" (15) is his motto.

Self-Centered and Self-Serving

Callous and hardhearted, he is absolutely incapable of any regard for others and their feelings and needs; in fact he seems to take a perverse pleasure in making people suffer. For instance, he takes Nataraj with him to the Memphi forest and abandons him there, even ignoring him when the poor man, hungry and tired, asks him for money. He shoots the pet dog of a small boy and horrifies the entire town by shooting an eagle and announcing his plan to shoot a temple elephant. He seems to be perfectly immune to all human emotions and feelings. Love is for him mere lust – hence the many and various women who ascend his staircase at night.

Ungratefulness

Ingratitude, a special characteristic of the rakshasa mentality, is another of Vasu's traits. The only homage he pays to his guru who trained him is contained in his own words. "I know his weak spot. I hit him there." (8)

No Respect for Laws and No Obedience

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Vasu revels in breaking all laws and is a law unto himself. As a hunter, he has a license to shoot only duck and deer. But he shoots all animals, including a tiger. He offers to collect donations for the poet, bullies people into paying. “One will have to sell the vessels in the kitchen and find the money, only to be rid of him” (150) this is the common reaction of people. But he embezzles the entire amount. Thus he makes a general nuisance of himself in Malgudi.

Swollen Ego and Ultimate Destruction

Sastri says: “Every rakshasa gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him.” (96)

This principle Narayan illustrates from the story of Bhasmasura:

who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched while nothing could touch him. He made humanity suffer. But Mohini, who was incarnated by the god was a dancer with whom the assura got infatuated. She promised to yield to him only if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. At one point in the dance, Mohini placed her palms on her head, and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second the blighting touch becoming active on his own head. (96)

Vasu is the perfect embodiment of the rakshasa Bhasmasura, is brought out by R.K. Narayan through Sastri in the novel. Vasu is evil incarnate. But this man, who was not afraid of any man or beast, was mortally afraid of mosquitoes and could not endure them. He says “Night or day, I run when a mosquito is mentioned” (25) Like Bhasmasura in the myth, Vasu kills himself before he could shoot Kumar, the temple elephant by using his hammer fist on a certain mosquito which had settled on his head thus he destroys himself.

Violent End Is Predestined

The second reference to the Bhasmasura myth comes right at the end of the novel, when Sastri points out to Natraj, the moral of Vasu’s sudden and violent end:

Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility
Yet the universe has survived all the rakshasas that were ever born. Every
demon carries within him, unknown to himself a tiny seed of self
destruction and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment.
Otherwise what is to happen to humanity? (183)

Common Indianness between Man-eaters of the Jungle and Man-eaters of a City!

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The man-eater in the novel, *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is not a tiger as we find in Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, but a man, an ego-centered man, for whom the objective world is non-existent, a modern Rakshasa, an active principle of destruction, who kills himself at the end. Once again, note how the title closely resembles a classic by a native speaker of English, who also contributed to the development and adoption of Indian words into English, to create an aura of Indianness! A creative writer takes an already established symbol or sign, and turns it around into another classic of all times! The storyline between *The Man-eater of Malgudi* and *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* needs more elaboration in another article.

Thus, Narayan's Indianness in the novel is seen in his use of the Indian myth of Bhasmasura as well as his language which is beautifully adapted to communicate a different Indian sensibility to his readers, both Indian and foreign. Language and content come together to create Indianness.

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