

## **Superstitions in R. K. Narayan's Works**

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### **Abstract:**

India is thought to be a land of superstition, though the idea of superstition as it is being viewed from a European scientific-rational viewpoint is itself questionable. R. K. Narayan, in his realistic representation of the Indian thought and culture, has manifest superstitious beliefs of the Indian society. The paper "Superstitions in R. K. Narayan's Works" attempts to make a critical assessment of Narayan's works to showcase how instead of just being a champion of traditions, Narayan is a harbinger of change and also a critique of Euro-centric ways.

### **Keywords:**

Culture, Euro-centric view, Indian Sensibilities, Malgudi, Myths, R. K. Narayan, Superstitious beliefs, Traditions.

Superstitious beliefs have been a part of Indian consciousness from time immemorial. This belief has been highlighted with the advent of the western colonial regime. From the western scientific-rational-logical parameter, some Indian beliefs are not rational, making them superstitions. It is a Euro-centric view that has been championed in the name of scientific progress, and thus the world has been accepting the same as truth. Many post-colonial and Indian writers have questioned this orientalist project of the west as they projected in their narratives how there is a need to look back at the traditional norms and beliefs. With this intention of looking at the Indian sensibilities termed as superstitious, selected works of R. K. Narayan have been explored in the research paper to justify how

Narayan is fighting back against the euro-centric views to glorify the Indian past. Furthermore, the realistic aspects of the narrative strategy of R. K. Narayan have also been explored, which makes him represent India as it was/is and not just take the western parameters as paramount when understanding India and its people.

Some scholars believe that R. K. Narayan has championed superstitions as he is superstitious in his personal life. Therefore there was a constant need to justify his stance in his works. This autobiographical critical facet of Narayan's work undervalues the greatness of Narayan as a writer and thinker. There is a need to critically revisit Narayan's work to manifest how he had been a harbinger of change.

Since the eighteenth century, western thought, which heavily emphasised rationality and scientific temperament, looked at various facets of life only from one singular point of view. Science has become the lens to gauge the world. Whatever was not thought to be at par with scientific thought was usually discarded either as superstition or as magic as they do not have a rational explanation. This kind of overemphasis on science and rationality was the keyway of European thought that remained so for centuries. From this perspective, looking at the non-European nation made these nations look superstitious, with no culture or civilisation.

The rise of the colonial west as a martial power to encapsulate the world into dominions of the western colonial nations made the world get divided into two – The Orient and the Occident, where the occident (the west) hegemonised knowledge formation and the way of viewing the world. This hegemony also led to viewing and representing the orient in a singular fashion of being uncivilised, uncultured, and superstitious. The writers from the colonised nations reacted against this European hegemony, both in political reality and in ideological terms, by critiquing the west and attempting to destabilise the Western thought process's norms. Throughout the world, whether it is Chinua Achebe in Africa or Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Latin America or R. K. Narayan in the Indian context, they are trying to ensure that their respective nations are not subjected to western tyranny both in political and ideological terms.

Superstition is being understood in a very tricky way in the western discourse. In the non-western narratives and knowledge, superstition plays a significant role, not because the non-westerners are superstitious, but because they accept superstition as part of their everyday lives. We neither question it, nor accept it to be scientific. Western discourse on rationality has nothing to do with the consciousness and sensibilities of the non-western people. When Indians came in contact with the British for the first time, they took the western culture to be alien. With the introduction of English education, both on the demands of the Indians like Raja Ram Mohun Roy and the efforts of Christian Missionaries, the Indians came in contact with the western philosophical discourses of the eighteenth-century European rationalists. This led to the questioning of the Indian culture, more specifically, the Hindu Culture. However, instead of merely blindly copying the west, the Indian scholars, writers, and intellectuals emphasised Indian culture and its traditions. But here, too, there was a change. It was not that Indians merely supported the traditional things of the Indian culture. The most outstanding example of it was the Reform Movements starting from the nineteenth century. However, they did not do away with the basic fabric of Indian thought and belief system. Indians were superstitious by nature as age-old traditions had made them believe in things in such a manner. The early Indian English writers, in their effort to realistically portray the society in all its myriad ways, delve deeper into the consciousness and sensibility of people to understand how the myths were being formed and circulated in the minds of the people.

Religion is the factor that decides and designs a human being's character, actions and aim in life. All the actions revolve around religion. In India, religion, culture, and traditions are inseparable, making several superstitious practices and beliefs a dominant force of life. Girija Khanna rightly remarks, "Superstitions are universal, but India with its age-old customs and traditions abound in them." This is why cultural, religious and personal superstitions are in abundance in the writing of Narayan. In his autobiography *My Days*, Narayan records his own experiences in astrology, his encounter with paranormal entities and good or bad omen, seeing a ghost with others religious and cultural superstitious beliefs and

practices. In other words, it is a sensible, realistic and honest portrayal of Indian society which makes Narayan such an appealing writer.

Many of the episodes in his writings are based on his personal experiences. He thought that it is worthy of sharing them with the readers for their uniqueness and their just resemblance to the texture of Indian sensibilities. R. K. Narayan states, “The ‘English teacher’ of the novel *Krishna* is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi, but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and child is Leela instead of Hema. The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed, with a child to look after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my own experience.” (150-151)

Narayan, through the panorama of his fictional town Malgudi evinces the realistic vision of rituals and cultural values. These norms are an inseparable part of Indian tradition and values and continue to shape the lives of Indian society. As the novelist has his roots in Hindu culture, his characters cannot shake themselves off the supposed irrational social customs and superstitions. In his works, Narayan deals with many popular cultural and religious superstitions of Indians.

In *The Financial Expert*, the people claim to see the ghost of an old registrar of cooperative society in his office, “Now watch, from within a teak frame suspended on the central landing, all the comings and goings, and he was said to be responsible for the occasional poltergeist phenomena, the rattling of paperweights, flying ledgers, and sounds like the brisk opening of folios, the banging of fists on a table, and so on ... evidence by successive night watchmen. This could be easily understood, for the ghost of the registrar had many reasons to feel sad and frustrated” (1). In *Mr, Sampath* Ravi is believed to be under the possession of some evil spirit. “Ravi with half-shut eyes was swaying. The exorcist picked up his cane and thwacked it sharply over Ravi’s back” (208). In the short story “Hero”, Narayan’s hero, Swami, is asked to sleep alone in his father’s office; he remembers all the stories of ghosts he has heard in his life. He recalls the mentioning of his friends about seeing

the ghost in the banyan tree at his street end. They frighten him, and he feels that he is sure to meet uncanny experience if he sleeps in the office.

Narayan, in his autobiographical work, *My Days*, records some magical experiences. After the death of his beloved wife Rajam, there was a time came when he lost his interest in writing. He lost all hope in his life. In *My Days*, he writes, “ ... but I felt clearly within my mind that I would never write a word again in my life. I had lost my anchorage. There is no meaning of existence” (152).

In *My Days*, he claimed that supernatural powers communicated with them to convey some important messages. As he writes, “One night during a subsequent visit to Madras at my sister’s house, I heard strange tappings on the window-pane, repeated exactly at a particular spot, at twelve-thirty in the night, which continued for ten minutes, ceased, and were repeated intermittently until two a.m. ... I was determined to sit through and understand the message. At five a.m., the telephone rang to tell us of the passing of close relatives exactly at twelve-thirty in the night when the tapping had started. I could catch messages or transmit my thought to others, and I could sense what coming ahead was or anticipate what someone would say.”(164)

Malgudi is a miniature of Indian society. Malgudians have blind faith in everything that comes in the name of religion. Sometimes these beliefs take the form of superstitions. Astrology is an integral part of religious practices. People seek guidance from astrologers for daily activities to all-important life events such as marriage, childbirth, death, buying or selling property, and travelling. “We cannot take risk in these matters. The planets must be beneficial to us” (*Mr Sampath*, 132).

Narayan, who belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family, cannot escape from these rituals and practices. In *My Days*, Narayan pens down his personal experience of horoscope and astrological prediction. Narayan fell in love with a girl named Rajam. He met her father and made a marriage proposal. Both the families had approved the alliance. Then Narayan encountered the significant hurdle that is matching of horoscope. “What mattered was not

my economic outlook, but my stars. My father-in-law, himself an adept at the study of horoscopes, had consultations with one or two other experts and concluded that my horoscope and the girls were incompatible. My horoscope had the seventh house occupied by mars, the seventh house indicating matrimonial aspects. Astrological texts plainly stated that mars in the seventh house indicated nothing but disaster ... ” (119).

*The Bachelor of Art* is another major work that deals with the same subject. A young bachelor Chandran falls in love with Malathi. But soon, the matter is discussed in his family. With the help of the matchmaker Ganpathi Sastrigal, the marriage proposal is sent to Malathi’s family. But this love story is not like Krishnan’s in *Seventh House*, but it is a one-sided love. Chandran is an immature lover who weaves his love story one-sided in imagination only and believes it to be true. “Quite right, said the old man. “Tomorrow, if everything is auspicious, they will send you the girl’s horoscope. We shall proceed with the other matters after comparing the horoscopes” (78). The Young bachelor thinks that the very next thing after the horoscope will be marriage. After three days, Chandran’s father receives a letter from Mr Krishnan, writing, “Our family astrologer says that the horoscopes cannot be matched after careful study and comparison. Since I have great faith in horoscopy, and since I have known from experience that the marriage of couples ill-matched in the stars often leads to misfortune and even tragedy, I have to seek a bridegroom elsewhere.”(86)

The novel *The Guide* illustrates the transformation of Raju, from a dishonest tour guide to a spiritual guide, a holy man who, in the end, but his life in danger for the sake of humanity. “This resolution gave him a peculiar strength. He developed on those lines: ‘If I should help the trees bloom, the grass grows by avoiding food. Why not do it thoroughly? For the first time in his life, he was making an earnest effort; for the first time, he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love. He was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested. He felt suddenly so enthusiastic that it gave him a new strength to go through with the ordeal. The fourth day of his fast found him quite sprightly. He went down to the river, stood facing upstream with his eyes shut, and repeated the litany. It was no more than a supplication to the heavens to send down rain and save humanity.”(238)

Thus, throughout R. K. Narayan's writings, there is a continuous preoccupation and critical deliberation on Indian myths, superstitious beliefs, traditions, and religious sensibilities, making people read Narayan's work too traditional in terms of their portrayal of India. However, it must be realised that Narayan is a critical insider and a realistic writer who faithfully represents what he experienced and what he saw all around him.

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