Travelling through Cultural Spaces: R.K. Narayan – the Indian Vs the Writer in My Dateless Diary: an American Journey

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Abstract: In the later years of his writing career, as R.K. Narayan discovers the unchartered territories of America, we uncover the two minds which function simultaneously: Narayan - the Indian, and Narayan - the writer. The cultural differences which he faces surprise him at times; and at times land him into uncalled for situations. Narayan carries with him an India to America and returns back with an America, which juxtaposes in different ways to his India.

Several perspectives come out as we move through the narrative. What were the situations Narayan had to face? Was he able to dwell in the dual consciousness of playing two different roles and living between two different identities at the same time in a foreign land? And finally was he able to connect with the cultural spaces around him? The aim of this paper would be to find answers to these questions by discussing the above two channels of thought (R.K. Narayan – the Indian Vs the Writer) one after another that contribute to the essence Narayan’s autobiographical essays in My Dateless Diary: an American Journey.

Keywords: American, Indian, Cultural space, Dual consciousness, Writer, Identity

I. Introduction

“At the age of fifty, when most people have settled for the safety of routine, R.K. Narayan left India for the first time to travel through America.” [1] My Dateless Diary records the memories of R.K. Narayan’s American Journey where he connects with the western sphere of the world. His astonishments, alienation, encounters with life, and growth as a writer, all have been elaborately narrated in this book. Narayan carries with him an India to America and returns back with an America, which juxtaposes in different ways to his India. As Narayan discovers the unchartered territories of America we uncover the two minds which function simultaneously: Narayan - the Indian, and Narayan - the writer. Several perspectives come out as we move through the narrative. This paper shall discuss the above two channels of thought one after another that contribute to the essence of the book.

II. R.K. Narayan - the Indian

The Indian in Narayan looks at the West with a very different perspective. He keeps on comparing the West with the East. He always tries to see his India in the West and see how things are different in both places and how his India is better in comparison to America. We may take a simple example from the text:

When I approached for coffee and was asked, ‘Black or white?’ ‘Neither’, I said haughtily. The server looked up rather puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘I want it neither black nor white, but brown which ought to be South India where devotees of perfection in coffee assemble from all over the world’. [2]

Donald L. Fixico makes this more explicit with his observation, “Collectively the urban Indian experience is shared by native people who have visited and lived in large cities, often bewildering experience involving encounters with the strange ways of a different culture, stories of what happened to urban Indians from sad instances to funny situations.” [3]

Narayan has always retained the desi way of thinking and writing. His style is full of cultural analogies. He is less a tourist and more an Indian, travelling through America. He keeps leaning on the memory lane and getting nostalgic about India. His response to the western stimuli (food, people, music, movies, encounters, and situations) is as amusing as his lament for the east and turns out to be a person of diverse experiences. Being a vegetarian makes him land into situations where he is unable to get food to eat. “As one immigrant put it, “For Americans, vegetarianism is fad, like a new age sort of thing, which you delve into...”
periods of time. They ask, ‘How long have you been a vegetarian?’ and are shocked to find that I haven’t eaten meat all my life.” [4]

Narayan faces difficulty in explaining the waiter what he needs because he is unable to believe that a person can be fully vegetarian (herbivorous). The following lines can be quoted from the text as an example:

“Felt hungry and slipped into a shop and asked for food, explaining that I was a vegetarian. I uttered the word ‘vegetarian’ with greatest caution since it stirred people in all unexpected ways; and dismayed them as if I had said I was a ‘Man-eater’. So I generally softened the blow by asking ‘Can you give me a lunch, please?’” [5]

Madhulika S. Khandelwal adds to this thought, “Although some Hindu immigrants in the United States have abandoned pure vegetarianism, many others conform to tradition. Some immigrants who have become more religious here are also dedicated vegetarians. Indian immigrants, however, find it difficult to explain their food habits to Americans. ‘They think that we must be eating grass and boiled vegetables only, and many feel sorry for us. If only they knew the variety of vegetarian foods available in India, they would envy us.” [6].

Narayan’s constant reference to South Indian food like Idli, Rasam, Sambhar, Masala Dosai, etc., lends not only Indian words to his English writing but also gives us an account of the writer’s longing for good vegetarian food in the foreign land.

Narayan tries his best to adjust and absorb himself into the atmosphere. But still in many ways he remains the Indian trying to find his ways in America, which is very relevant from the narrative and tone of the read. He feels the transformation that affects thousands of Indians living abroad. Fixico puts it aptly, “They are undergoing a transformation from their Indian background to mainstream assimilation, and they are caught in a vortex as they perceive themselves as a suppressed minority.” [7].

Narayan exists somewhere in a cocoon which tosses between Eastern and Western ethics. He bears a very compassionate and humanistic approach towards others. We can well experience it from the incidents where he deals with the publishers and people. He counsels Mrs X just like a close friend, deals with her problems, and takes care of her emotions.

He includes anecdotes like the story of Govind which are very Indian by texture. He well portrays the situation of a beef eating Indian married to a white skinned girl in America who is abandoned by his kins in India. On a similar note, D.N.Jha writes, “Most Hindus today are guided by a religious concern for cow protection. Therefore an average Indian, rooted in what appears to him as his traditional Hindu religious heritage, carries the load of the misconception that his ancestors, especially the Vedic Aryans, attached great importance to the cow on account of its inherent sacredness.” [8].

The perceived feelings of being treated as an outcaste and the inherent nostalgia of home comes in a very touching way through Narayan’s narrative. Narayan in a witty narrative suggests how “More importantly, the cow has tended to become a political instrument in the hands of rulers over time.” [8].

His Indian-ness is also reflected in several situations where he becomes the centre of attention because of his lack of speaking skills. J.C.Wells asserts, “There are Indians educated at British public schools whose accent is unquestionably RP. There are Indians with a fair knowledge of English whose accent is nevertheless so impenetrable that English people can understand them, if at all, only with the greatest difficulty.” [9]

We can take example of the situation which he faced due to his lack of proper pronunciation capabilities of English words, “All Indians say develop, committee; instead of De-Vellop, and ‘Committee’-’Does Pneumonia develop?’” she said, which I found very irritating. I merely replied, ‘So much of an accent seems to me a waste of good breath...’” [10]

There were many accounts where Narayan is being sought for to answer questions regarding India’s political scenario, Gandhi’s freedom fight, Nehru’s socialist temperament, etc. But he always chose to remain not silent but neutral. This shows how unbiased yet careful he is while representing his country in the foreign land.

Narayan’s experience with an Indian who wanted him to carry a load of condiment to New York for his daughter and son-in-law is a much well known experience that almost every Indian has to face in their trip to a foreign land. He mentions explicitly the pain and trauma that such approaches carry with them. Though this was a very unpleasant experience which he faced, there were several other instances where he actually was being ill treated because of being an Indian by race. Fixico states, “Indian people learn to adjust, altering their family structure and personality, and simultaneously threatening their distinct culture, forcing them to deal with society’s problems such as racial differences in an urban setting.” [11]

His tenure at Tennessee made him encounter with one such experience while he was in a bus going to Nashville, where there were separate reservations for ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ people. The following lines may be quoted from the text to justify the stance:

“The conductor manoeuvres in such a manner that the coloured men can get in only after the whites are seated... White passengers blink unhappily when I get in. Each tries to cover a vacant seat next to him with an overcoat or hat for fear that I may attempt to occupy a prohibited seat and create a situation.” [12]

Thus from the style, content, and the richness of Narayan’s experiences, ooze a cadence of Indian aura which make his writing not only an enchanting read but also gives us experiences which enrich our perceptions.
III. R.K.Narayan- the Writer

R.K.Narayan, travelling through America was not only an ‘Indian’ but also a ‘writer’. He had been to the foreign land on a Rockefeller Fellowship. My Dateless Diary was the output of a daily journal that he maintained during this visit. Narayan was an established writer in those days and his books formed an important part of the syllabus of many western universities. His perception of America as a ‘writer’ is a different from his perception of America as an ‘Indian’. As a writer he is humorous, objective, realistic, and detached. He observes his situations from a distance and counts them from the impressions which they frame on his mind. May it be an encounter with a great writer or a common barber, each encounter earns an equal stand on his journal. He writes more from the experiences than the encounters.

Narayan started his career as a news reporter. His beginnings form a great impact on his writing style. His writing conceives the style of a working reporter in the hurry of recording events. His sentences are short and often epigrammatic. According to J.A. Cuddon, Epigram is, “As a rule a short, witty statement in verse or prose which may be complimentary, satiric or aphoristic. Coleridge defined it as: A dwarfish whole, its body brevity, and wit its soul. Originally an inscription on a monument or statue, the epigram developed into a literary genre.”

Narayan’s epigrammatic use often leads to multiple interpretations and diverse meanings. He squeezes the essence of a long overt sentence into a few words or sometimes one word, which adds to the effect. “Tuesday. Arrive Berkeley. We decide to get down here rather than go up to San Francisco.”

He often uses the reportorial style of writing:

‘It is Pat’s,’ Said his friend.
‘Who is Pat?’
‘His wife,’ he said.
‘What does she do now to know the time?’ I asked. [15]

His style is adorned with frequent use of apt similes. His comparisons do not form before us a network of images which turn and twist to frame a complicated jargon of meaning; rather he prefers to make his writing simple by drawing images from the common sphere of life, that turn out to be astounding with the writer’s craftsmanship.

As Ross Murfin puts it, simile is “A figure of speech (more specifically a trope) that compares two distinct things by using words such as like or as to link the vehicle and the tenor.” [16]. Narayan uses beautiful similes in his writing. His similes are homely and strong- “Human beings get knit up in all fantastic unbelievable ways, complex and unexpected links like the wiring at the back of a radio panel.” [17] “Having a living author on hand may be like a live lobster on your plate.” [18]

In Westward Bound, the fourth section of the book, Narayan presents a whole chapter which deals with the style of advertising. According to Jen Green, “Advertising is a form of communication paid for by individuals or companies, with the aim of influencing people to think or act in a particular way or providing information. The aim of most ads is to persuade us to buy goods or services offered by the advertiser.” [19]

In Westward Bound, the sub chapter named One Continuous Mood represents the writer at his most humorous, dramatic yet journalistic mood of writing. This gives us an insight into the flexibility of R.K.Narayan as a writer of various genres. We can quote a passage from the book as an example-

Voice: By the way, I can hear you drinking your soup. Remember one thing. XYZ soup is reinforcing with vitamin B14. It is the only soup with vitamin B14. Remember it. B14 will knock the years out of your age. ...

O.W: ... My hands are soft because I use only Gopi Flakes for laundering my linen. Gopi also can wash your silks, your sink, your utensils, your walls, your furniture, floor, carpet, shoes, or automobile. In fact Gopi is right for any cleaning job. Gopi cleans twenty-five times faster than any other detergent and costs five times less. Remember Gopi is the only one which has Blimol in it. [20]

His writing is lucid and gathers momentum from its free flow nature moulded with first person narrative, simple language, and jargon free sentences. As a writer he bears an eye for the details and captures the whole experience of his visit to United States in a travelogue style of writing. Another important aspect of his personality is that he keeps on drawing similitude between the people he encounters in real life with his own fictional characters. The Chandaran of U.S. serves as a good example. There were several other occasions where he had to meet the students of universities and answer back the questions fired on him about the characters and contexts of his novels. This marks a very uncomfortable Narayan who is perplexed for being trapped somewhere within the space that exists in between a detached reader and a grossly involved writer.

His encounter and bonding with the popular personalities of the West like Aldous Huxley, Greta Garbo, Martha Graham, Milton Singer, Edward G. Robinson, and Cartier Bresson enrich him as a human being and as a writer. What better than this statement coming from the publishers of the country of his visit- “William Faulkner, Hemingway, and Narayan are the world’s three greatest living writers.” [21].
IV. Conclusion

My Dateless Diary though sounds to be a book, written with no time bounds, still it falls into a time period as every ‘datelessness’ has a limit of its own. Throughout the book we find scattered instances of the making of the novel *The Guide*, which gives us the clue to guess the time scale of this travelogue. Rather than an adjective, here the word ‘dateless’ suffices more as a metaphor -- a metaphor of the eternity of art, experience, and journey -- which makes him re-discover the Indian as well as the writer in him.

References