

Review

Jane Austen and R. K. Narayan: A Comparative Analysis of Timeless Genii

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Jane Austen and R.K. Narayan have both been great artists who painted life as they saw it— truthfully, with a delicate brush dipped in various hues of life. Austen was an English novelist, born in 1775, long before Narayan, at a quiet and calm place in England. She left behind her, some very memorable and timeless works of fiction—which have passed into the category of ‘classic literature’. Narayan, on the other hand, was born in a traditional Tamil family in pre- independent India. He belongs to the foremost line of Indian English writers and has to his credit a number of books, both fiction and non-fiction. Both Austen and Narayan, though different from each other, are alike in their popularity and appeal which has transcended the boundaries of time, age and clime. Immense is their contribution to English literature. Against the background of differences in various aspects of their works, some common factors can be found in their writings. It is these few subtle links and strand of similarities which this paper probes into. The most striking similarity is that both these writers have focused mostly on the extraordinary element in the ordinary lives of the common men and women. Far from the maddening crowd, theirs is a quiet and serene world, full of people who have strong yet meek, courageous yet humble, vivacious yet taciturn personalities.

Key words: Literature, fiction, memorable, traditional, similarities, humanity

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INTRODUCTION

“Kalidas was India’s Shakespeare , Tagore was our Shelley, Bankim Chandra our Scott and R.K. Narayan our Jane Austen.”

So said a critic (Anon, 2000: 20)— comparing Narayan’s genius to that of Jane Austen. There certainly are many parallels between the two, yet there is also a great contrast. Narayan surpasses Austen in his deeper

understanding of human mind and in his truthful picture of life and understanding of that subtle, hidden sorrow and loneliness of the human heart. There echoes in my memory, lines written on Jane Austen which suit R.K. Narayan as well –

Far from the richest crowd and the poorest folk

And choosing dames and gents of middle class;
It fixed a range her people she did lock;
Yet glowing bright like candles in peery glass.

Factors affecting the writer's works:

Not just social and cultural factors, but individual and independent thoughts, work together to influence the essence of his works and shape his characters. Both, the social, as well as the cultural climate of a writer's age, have a great effect on his or her own personality, outlook and creativity. A writer and his work of art is the product of various factors like his family background, values, education, upbringing, but above all, his social conventions, customs and culture. Try as hard as he or she may, a writer's creation cannot shed off the effects of his social and cultural climate, which is all prevailing and a part and parcel of his conscious and sub-conscious mental make-up. But even remaining within this confinement, very few writers achieve the scale of perfection, which, I think, both Jane Austen and R.K. Narayan did.

Beautifully perfect and complete within borders

Given the fact that both, Austen and Narayan are great novelists in British and Indian English Literature, it can be said with conviction, that they not just great, but are also absolute masters of their art. Both the authors have neither any predecessor nor have they left any successor or follower; they are simply unsurpassable. They gave novel, Austen – the English novel, and Narayan – the Indian English novel, distinct forms, unique themes, remarkable subject and original craftsmanship; but above all they gave it what good and classical literature truly stand for, i.e. – human values. Their works not just bring out the humour and agony of ordinary life but they do so while displaying deep humanism. The similarities between the two authors also extend to their juxtaposing the demands of society against the confusion of individuality— and while doing so both the writers sometimes directly, and sometimes indirectly, instill in their characters as well as in the readers, the essential human values viz. goodness, tolerance, mercy, honour and softness of speech and conduct.

Their novels are written on limited variety of subjects. While Austen is famous for her 'two-inch ivory' filigree in her novels; Narayan's 'two-inch ivory' is his imaginary town 'Malgudi' with its inhabitants. They throw light, with most sincerity, on the various aspects of societies to which they belonged and also on various phases of life. Their novels are original conception of their social, moral and spiritual vision. Though they are different in their subject matters – the former, purely a social novelist dealing with the life of women mostly in early nineteenth

century British society and the latter, a moral thinker dealing with several problems of life, such as human relations. These relations are based on the effect of love, paradoxes of life and destiny. Thomas Hardy's following observation holds good for both Austen and Narayan –

"It is better for a writer to know about a little bit of the world remarkably well than to know a great part of the world remarkably little." (Hardy, 1955: 72)

Art of Characterisation

Both Austen and Narayan have an extraordinary sensitive understanding of the mind and heart of their characters. In their characterization, both the writers show remarkable understanding of human nature and keen observation of human actions. They penetrate into the spirit of their characters and then they unfold them. They step into their personalities and look at the world through their eyes.

An essential gift of a great novelist is the power of creating living characters, and Austen and Narayan are endowed with this gift to the highest degree. They have given us deep psychological study of men and women. They realize that a circle of everyday, humdrum, common people could supply material of infinite human possibilities of thought and action; and, like Chaucer, they did it with joyful and sometimes sorrowful detachment. The vitality of their characters never runs dry. They are not like delicate machines going on for an allotted course of actions.. This quality of everlasting freshness is a token of human reality; for human beings— even the most ordinary of them, have the immense possibility to provoke thought and inspire creation of a great work of art—and this is precisely what Austen and Narayan have done.

Characters created by Austen and Narayan seem traditional and bound by their customs as their creators are children of their respective Ages. Very true, they indeed are as they clearly reflect the social cultural, economic and philosophical outlook of their times. But we can also conclude, quite appropriately that both Austen and Narayan have a strong streak of individuality. The most striking characteristic about them is that despite being conventional, both Austen and Narayan were modern and had an open outlook, ahead of their ages. Both chose to refrain from the major political, historical, national and international upheavals and changes of their times. Both are masters of irony and yet their view and world is gentle, kind and free from cynicism.

Narayan's Characters

Narayan presents a variety of characters—types and

individuals. All his characters have deep relation with their societies and reality and are true representatives of Indian life. There is a flood of characters- children, parents, ne'er-do-wells, grannies, peons, officers, clerks, shopkeeper, writers, journalist, lawyers, beggars etc.— revealing their true selves in various roles of life-as father , son, husband-wife, friend, lover, rival etc. As the critic K.V. Murti says –

“For characterization Narayan employs sophisticated techniques: close-up, montage, flashback, fade in, fade out, flash forward, slow motion, stream of consciousness, cartoon, broken eloquence, dotting, chipped dialogue, scriptural and other references etc.” (1987: 132)

Austen's Characters

Here is where Narayan differs with Austen. The range of Austen's characters is limited, unlike Narayan. Her characters are mostly young men and women, sometimes parents or other senior relatives, but seldom do we find much variety of characters as we find in Narayan's works. There are hardly any children, beggars, doctors, teachers etc. Very senior or very young characters normally do not have much role to play in her novels. Her characters typify nothing, for their actions and speech are familiar but these also are full of common sense – something that is very uncommon.

Similarities between the two geni

Both Austen and Narayan were gifted with that rare genius of making the familiar and commonplace intensely interesting and amusing. Their characters are ordinary men and women, as one might come across in everyday life. They do not present great kings and princes, intellectuals or statesmen, saints or sinners. Their range is confined only to the ordinary persons of the type who seem to be belonging to our next door neighbor ; and yet they turn them into hero sometimes – as Darcy is, in his benevolence and love; as Jagan is, in his stoic tolerance ;and as Elinor is, in her gentle and good disposition. Don't we wish that today, in this world of hustle and bustle, of the mad race, of growing insensitivity and intolerance, all that society needs most is people like these?

The fiction of Austen and Narayan, deceptively simple and elusive in terms of literary theory and technique, is distinct for its voice, its fusion of the comic with the sublime, and its philosophical depth. Theirs is a style that has lightness of touch, is crystal-clear and lucid; but, at the same time, wonderfully expressive and full of understated surprises. Both Austen and Narayan had a great sympathy for all their characters. Like Chaucer,

they love them in spite of all their follies and weaknesses – as Jane Austen said –

“Selfishness must always be forgiven for you know there is no hope for a cure.” (1955: 52)

In some of their novels, both the novelists have created characters, who seem to represent the novelists themselves and who are keen spectators and of all that is going on around them. For example— In *Sense and Sensibility*, we have Elinor. She is not a sprightly creature, and is certainly somewhat like her creator Austen herself, especially in her inner good sense and clear insight. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* are the closest likeness in characters. In the similar manner, Swami of *Swami and Friends*, Chandran of *The Bachelor of Arts* and Krishnan of *The English Teacher* were created by Narayan in his own image.

An author makes his characters his own mouthpiece only when he has a philosophy to propound or his own views to propagate. But Austen and Narayan seldom bothered about any philosophy. They did not wish so and when they seldom did, they made their characters pegs for ethical speculations. If there is any philosophy to be found in their works, it is that of humanism and practical wisdom. They are witnesses and not judges of life. They have sympathy for all, but with little self detachment. Their personal attitudes to all their characters are mainly one of understanding based on sympathy and compassion. That makes them great artists.

Parallels between the characters of Austen and Narayan

We can also see a parallel between the two characters viz. Jagan of *The Vendor of Sweets* and Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. I feel that Austen has not done justice to the character of Mrs. Bennet. Both, Jagan and Mrs. Bennet are best well-wishers of their children but both are dubbed by their children as old-fashioned, dim-wits and even lacking in social grace and 'a person of meaner understanding' (Mrs. Bennet). Both Jagan and Mrs. Bennet are anxiety ridden parents. The difference between the two is that Jagan does not talk, and does not have anybody to share his anxieties, and hence suffers silently at the hands of his careless, insensitive and prodigal son Mali who refuses to carry on the business of his father and brings him, immeasurable misery to such an extent that Jagan renounces his worldly life and activities. He leaves his home, his shop and even his town. On the other hand, we have Mrs. Bennet, who is mother of not one or two, but five daughters. Being the mother, she is naturally concerned for the marriage of her daughters – but unfortunately her concern or anxiety is

neither shared nor understood by her husband –the father of five daughters. Mrs. Bennet has to remind and persuade her husband all the time to look for and approach eligible bachelors for their daughters. But her husband gives a deaf ear to her worries as he himself is not even least worried on that account. Mrs. Bennet is made the object of ridicule by her husband and Elizabeth – both of whom take pride in their intelligence. But for all their intelligence and practical wisdom, they cannot understand Mrs. Bennet’s anxieties – neither does Jane Austen, nor any of her worthy critics have. I fail to understand why Mrs. Bennet has been made an object of ridicule by everybody in and outside the novel, because she was persistently thinking about the welfare and security of her daughters, which, any mother in her place would be, especially if the father does not play any role in or show any concern towards securing sons-in-law for the daughters. It is entirely natural and plausible that a mother in her situation, with a reckless, improvident husband and five daughters, would develop an unceasing anxiety about their future. Austen has not understood the worries of Mrs. Bennet and done gross injustice to her character.

Thus, although, in a way, both, the novelists have shown parents (Austen- mother and Narayan- the father Jagan) suffering at the hands of their children, yet Austen could never reach the height of pathos we see in R.K. Narayan – as Austen gives just formal, soft, sweet drawing room talk of ladies and gentlemen. She does not present any deep, emotional scenes and is very reserved and practical in her depiction of love as an emotion. Here is where the similarity lies – Jagan never loses temper at Mali, neither displays any other emotion or affection towards him – he never brings tears to his eyes while talking about his deep love, care and duty as both mother and father and total devotion to his son Mali – but silently does his herculean duty as both father and mother besides being the bread earner. Both Mali and Elizabeth

never realized their parents’ concern for them, although Mali goes very far in bringing untold misery to his father.

CONCLUSION

Both the writers viz. Jane Austen and R.K. Narayan were far removed from each other in many ways – age, time, gender, country, language, traditions, custom etc, but there are certainly some characteristics common in their writings. It is almost amazing to find even a streak of commonality between otherwise such geographically, chronologically and socially different writers. Their range is limited, their understanding of human relationships is deep and their presentation is equally simple. Both of them were not inspired by any outside agency but their own lives and day-to-day experiences of life. Both remained absolutely indifferent (in their writings) to the major historical and national events of their times and both confined their characters to a particular class of society. But the great contrast is that Narayan presented, though subtly as he seemed to understand better, the essential pathos of life.

Among the novelists and scholars of English Literature, Jane Austen and R.K. Narayan hold very outstanding positions. They are both pioneers of progressivism and torch -bearers of New Learning and beginners of new phase in English Literature, towards which their contribution has been phenomenal.

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