

## **A STUDY OF SUPERSTITIONS IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF R. K. NARAYAN**

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### **Abstract:**

R. K. Narayan is a legendary name among the Indian writers writing in English. In his writings, the characters are seen to be following various types of superstitions. Whether the author truly wanted to propagate these superstitions or not is a question. But after having a look at his personal life, we come to know that due to various personal experiences and impressions he used to believe in these superstitions. The same is reflected in his work.

**Key words:** superstitions, supernatural, evil, magic, spirit, ghost

Most of the people believe in evil eye, evil spirits, black magic, witchcraft, talisman, astrology, matching of horoscopes, ghosts, prodigies and portents, good and bad omens, sadhus, religious priests and other popular superstitions regarding many days, months, plants and animals. R.K. Narayan presents a real to life picture of Indian society. Superstitions appear again and again in his writings. "People of Malgudi are representatives of all that is good and bad society. They have faith in evil spirits. They are equally superstitious. They can believe in the miracles of pseudo-saints." (Singh p. 40) Sadhus, sanyasis and swamis are ever recurring characters in the fiction of Narayan. Keeping fasts to please gods and goddesses and to ask boons and then to show them their gratefulness, communication with the soul of the dead person, matching of horoscopes, asking for an auspicious occasion are a few examples prevalent in the writings of Narayan which depict people's belief in superstitions. Much is woven into the fabric of his writings which does not provide any logical and reasonable explanation and may be termed as unreasonable, illogical and superstitious.

In his writings, Narayan has exploited many popular superstitions, rituals and beliefs of Indians. Thus, he has been successful in presenting a true Indian atmosphere. The reality of Malgudi is usually built round Indian beliefs and superstitions. The writer himself as well as his characters seem to believe in the auspicious days and muhurtas. Narayan, in his autobiography *My Days*, writes: "On a certain day of September, selected by my grandmother for its auspiciousness, I bought an exercise book and wrote the first line of a novel." (Narayan p.79) It shows that any work particularly of writing, started on an auspicious day brings success and fame. During the formative and impressionable years of childhood, Narayan lived with his grandmother who seems to be a superstitious lady as she was seen commenting "a photograph was likely to shorten the subject's life." (Narayan p.3) A tailor named Appu Maistry, who lived in the neighbourhood came every month to have a look at the three days old crescent moon and immediately after that he looked at the writer's uncle's face for good luck. Narayan writes in *My Days*: "If one's eyes fall on a virtuous face first thing after glancing at the new crescent, one will have good luck a whole month', says the shastras, said Appu." (Narayan p. 44) All these small but significant incidents got deep rooted in the mind of the writer. Perhaps there was a great influence of his neighbours and his grandmother, the surroundings on him and only that might be the reason that the superstitions are reflected so vividly and commonly in his writings.

All the important occasions like marriages of Chandran and Sushila in *The Bachelor of Arts*, of Kamakshi with the Delhi based boy in *The Missing Mail*, of Sita and Rama in *The Ramayana*; sending the horoscope to the bride's or bridegroom's house, fixing the date of Rama's coronation in *The Ramayana*, hanging of signboard of the shop in *The Career*, inauguration of the picture Burning of the Kama' in *Mr. Sampath* were accomplished on auspicious days and time after consulting the astrologers who after carefully studying their horoscope and taking into consideration the ruling

planets and stars gave a suitable date. In the world of Malgudi astrology is generally accepted, though it is not always practised." (Singh p. 36)

Belief in good and bad omens is seen among the characters of Narayan as well as the members of his family. R.K. Narayan's characters believe in good and bad omens and at times are able to predict the future with the help of these omens. In *The Mispaid Anklet*, Kovalan the King of Puhar along with his wife came to Madurai and stayed there. While going out of the house he did not notice the humped bull, a bad omen in front of him and, later it was learnt that he was mistaken as a thief by the king's men and executed. Thus, the bad omen predicted disaster of death well in advance. Many bad omens like howling of wild jackals, wolves and foxes, screeching of vultures and crows, presence of snakes and vermin everywhere specially in the place of worship and strange unholy noises filling the air are again and again in the writings of Narayan.

R.K. Narayan was totally heart broken, shattered, discouraged, dismayed, dejected and in low spirits after the death of his wife and lost his interest in life and art. The soul of his dead wife contacted him first through a Madras lawyer and then communicated directly and gave him the message to be happy and cheerful. Her persistent appeal aroused the artist's interest and he started writing afresh. "He is convinced from personal experience that the soul continues to be after the body is dead and has been cremated." (Sundaram p. 23) Krishna, in *The English Teacher*, became a widower only after three years of married life which made him very upset. He suffers but survives, he gets peace and harmony in his attempt to communicate with the spirit of his dead wife." (Singh p.11)

Many of Narayan's stories deal with the supernatural element. In *An Accident*, where Arul Doss, a chauffeur long dead, repairs a car suddenly stalls on the road. In *Old Man of Temple*, where Krishna Battar, a priest murdered by thieves decades ago, gets into the body of Doss, the driver and has to be exorcised. *Old Bones* tells the story of Murugesan, murdered by the peon in the Dak Bungalow for the money in his possession. Murugesan's ghost gets into the body of Raju- a twelve-year old boy and does various physical feats which are beyond the capacity of a boy like him. In the story *Cat Within*, the exorcist clearly tells the gathering outside the shop that an evil spirit had entered the body of the cat and creating trouble. Outwardly it appeared to be a cat but none knew reality. In *Mr. Sampath*, Ravi's strange behaviour is attributed to the influence of evil spirits and his mother calls an exorcist who with the margosa twig thrashes him and with certain religious mantras tries to drive away the evil spirit and at the later stage he is taken to the temple where a large number of possessed persons were staying. The evil spirits can make a person fall ill. In *The English Teacher*, when Krishna's wife Sushila falls ill, her mother is convinced that the illness was caused by the influence of evil eye and evil spirit and she calls for an exorcist. The evil spirits are believed to stay in empty houses, deserted places and near water and groves.

Belief in witchcraft and magic is very popular among the masses. Even today magicians show certain feats of magic with their superhuman powers. With their magic, the magicians can create many eatables and cut person into two halves and put him together. Describing the feats of magicians, king Lavana in the story *Lavana* in the collection *Gods, Demons and Others* tells that a magician could throw a rope up into air and walk over it, rise from the floor to the ceiling and floating comes back to the ground, could develop trees fully under a towel. In the story a magician comes to the king's court and wants to show his feats. When the eyes of the king meet with that of the magician's, the whole scene changes. The action of the whole story takes place in the magical world and when after two minutes the king wakes up, he had lived a life of seventy years along with his wife and four sons.

It cannot be said for certain whether Narayan is a superstitious writer or not, though his experiences and the influence of his wife and grandmother had a great effect on him which is clearly reflected at times in his writings. At times, he is seen to uphold the belief in superstitions like evil eye, evil spirits, ghosts and devils, the world of horror and supernatural, good and bad omens,

matching the horoscopes, consulting the astrologers but at times he is seen to reject outrightly the belief in these superstitions. Even in this scientific age, many unscientific things like tying talisman, sorcerer's magic and exorcist's activities are done for curing diseases and illness and removing barrenness among women. Even the extension and expansion of education has not been able to dispel the darkness of blind beliefs from among the masses. In fact, no human being can be free from superstitions. Even the people in the developed and progressive countries have not been able to free themselves from the clutches of superstitions. People of all ages and all places have blind and deep-rooted faith in these irrational, illogical and baseless beliefs. These superstitions seem to arise out of a sense of fear and insecurity. In fact, however scientific and rational attitude of life one has the belief in superstitions is so deep rooted that it cannot be shaken. The superstitions will stay on as long as human beings are unable to attain all knowledge which is an impossible state to arrive at.

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