

**The Subalterns in the Modern Transition of India:
Starting the Discussion from R.K. Narayan's Fictions**

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Abstract

In the 20th century, India experienced national independence, the partition, land reform, peasant insurgency, and the rise of separatist groups and religious fundamentalists. After nearly a century, India shows moderate success in negotiating the transition. Yet for a long time, the establishment of the national state and India's successful transition were touted as the work of national elites, ignoring the contribution of subaltern groups.

Modern Indian history offers us channels to understand India from the perspective of elites. Fiction, on the other hand, allows us to read India from below. The fictions of R.K. Narayan (1907-2001) can be regarded as epics capturing modern India's plight. Narayan created fictions set mostly in the small town of Malgudi. His fictional town serves as a good periscope for observing the living state and resistance of subaltern groups for nearly 80 years. Narayan belonged to the upper class, though. He seems consciously or unconsciously hiding that which cannot be included in the grand narratives or those that fail to live up to his understanding of Indian society.

Following subaltern studies, post-colonialism, and feminism, the project examines women and widows, untouchables, landless peasants, craftsmen, and other underprivileged groups. Subaltern studies pursue how subalterns are represented in official documents and elite writing. They argue how the nation-state

inherited colonial systems of hierarchy, triggering new forms of oppression. The feminist and postcolonial critiques also hope to give us new and culturally-rooted insights regarding women.

The research project examines the subaltern groups in the modern transition of India, starting from the discussion on the representation of subaltern groups in R. K. Narayan's fictions. The subaltern groups are actually oppressed most in the modern transition of India and the oppression is legitimized by the democratic system. This research is very important because it discloses a myth that the postcolonial theory exaggerates the negative effect of colonial rule or colonial culture upon the natives in postcolonial period and thus offer an excuse for the inability of the nationalists' government to solve the problems of their country. The project figures out the significance of the studies on the indigenous tradition, which actually are quite oppressive and hostile to certain groups and thus incompatible with the modernity, including the democratic system of which they are proud.

The concepts or methodologies used include the following: Firstly, biographic studies, through this method, life experience of R. K. Narayan and especially his writing experience will be examined, to see how his life experience shaped his unique style of writing and his attitudes toward the themes of subaltern groups.

Secondly the narrative analysis, through this method, I am trying to find out how R.K. Narayan represents the subaltern groups and why the subaltern groups are speechless and nearly invisible in most of his writing.

Thirdly, relative methods of the sociology of literature are also very useful in examining the relevance of the projection of R.K. Narayan's fictions to the reality

of Indian history. This also includes the fieldwork and the readings of authoritative data.

Fourthly, feminist reading is also used to examine how women were represented in the fictions of R. K. Narayan and the challenges and problems they face in reality.

Finally, the approaches of School of subaltern studies are also used to define the subaltern groups and also try to reread Indian history and the reality during the process of the modern transition of India from the perspective of social bottom.

1. The Representation of Subalterns in R.K. Narayan's Fictions

Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 at Chennapatna, near Mysore in south India and his widely known name R. K. Narayan was shortened from Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, following the advice of Graham Greene, an English writher who can be said as the discoverer of this genius and also his life-long friend. In the whole life he wrote more than ten fictions and a couple of collections of short stories.

Narayan set his story in an Imaginary town called Malgudi. This fictional town is described as somewhere in South India and having some elements of Hardy's Wessex or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, revealed by some critics. I think the later statement is more proper because the imaginary towns that Hardy and Narayan portrayed are closer in that the two places are the specimens of the modern transition of England and India respectively. From this place and its inhabitants, we can feel the pulse of the modernization of India and its impact upon people's life and soul.

But in the context of India, the full story of the real social bottom, the lower castes, in most of Narayan's fictions, rarely appears, or even when they appear, they are still stereotyped as the obedient servants. From the following quotation we generally know that his protagonists are actually lower middle class or at least people of properties.

"We were about twenty unrelated families in Kabir Street, each having inherited a huge rambling house stretching from the street to the river and back. so comfortably placed, (we) were mainly occupied in eating, breeding, celebrating festivals, spending the afternoons in a prolonged siesta on the pyol, and playing cards all evening. This sort of existence did not appeal to me. I liked to be active, had dreams of becoming a journalist. I noticed a beggar woman one day, at the Market Gate, with Siamese twins, and persuaded my friend Jayaraj, photographer and framer of pictures at the Market Arch, to take a picture of the woman, wrote a report on it and mailed it to the first paper which caught my attention at the Town Hall reading room; that was my starting point as a journalist. Thereafter I got into the habit of visiting the Town Hall library regularly to see if my report appeared in print." (P1-2, The Bachelor of Arts)

His third novel, *The Dark Room*, published in 1938 began to handle the issue of subaltern groups. In the fiction, the dark room is not only a place for the retreatment of the woman when she is abused by her husband, but also a metaphor which discloses the miserable conditions of women and the oppressions imposed upon them by men. They are often victims within a marriage. This is the first book that Narayan casts spotlights upon women issues, which also received good reviews. Starting from Savitri in *The Dark Room* (1938) to Bala in *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), Narayan's women characters grow stronger and show that the emergence of the 'New Woman' is not a myth or a utopia in India. However, this

New Woman is mainly influenced by the West and expresses their resistance against oppressive elements of Indian culture by using the value of the West as resources. She struggles for freedom, asserts equality and searches for identity. Narayan's New Woman might not have brought earth-shaking changes to India, yet she has certainly brought positive changes not only in her man but also in Indian society.

Generally we can see that, though R. K. Narayan is a traditionalist, he is undoubtedly aware of the oppressive elements of Indian traditional culture, which is quite different from the findings of many other Indian experts who attribute all the sufferings of subalterns to colonial rule and western culture. And further from his depiction we can also see that in his understanding the modernization of India not only means the reexamination of colonial rule and its leftover but also the re-examination of their own tradition which is cherished by the nationalists.

The Financial Expert, published in 1952, considered to be among his greatest masterpieces. When the miserable conditions of subaltern groups were talked about, this book is most likely to be mentioned as the supportive evidence to indicate that colonial institutions are the source of the sufferings of the subaltern groups. We all know that in the story, British opened the bank in the small town which actually trapped the poor into deep debt and they can't get out of the circle. But a closer reading reminds us that it is the native financial advisors who were misleading the poor people and brought them to misery. We can see that R. K. Narayan notices the social stratification in the modern transition of India. The elites who are actually the groups who take the share of the benefits from colonizers' institutions and after independence they are comfortable with the existing hierarchical structure and unwilling to make any significant change,

which is the real source of the sufferings of subaltern groups. But as a member of the elites, he himself benefited from the colonial products-English, and he has to first please his target audience-English speaking readers, he is impossible to disclose the root of the bitterness of poor people. In his writing, he seems satisfied with the exposure of India's clumsy imitation of modernity.

The Guide, written in 1956, was cheered by many readers for the heroine's strong resistance against the deeply-rooted patriarchic culture of India. First she has the courage to get out of unhappy marriage and married herself to a tourist guide she loves deeply. Second, when she found that her new love was just using her as a moneymaking machine, she left this mean guy without slightest hesitation. This broke the stereotype of Indian women, who were imagined as cowardly, dependent and fragile. After the independence we can see that the Indian women are consciously against the oppressive elements of Indian traditional culture and also actively take advantage of the western culture, including their lifestyle to resist the oppression of their husbands under the masks of defending Indian tradition. The book won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1958 and I think his contribution lies in his boldness and courage when facing Indian nationalists who are always blindly against outside civilized elements, labeled colonial and defend everything traditional, even oppressive elements, as Indian civilization essence.

In 1961 Narayan published his next novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, which was reviewed as having a narrative that is a classical art form of comedy, with delicate control. The Man-Eater is also a metaphor here. Vasu is a powerful wanton musclemans. He does everything he likes to and often bullies the people around him. He lives in Nataraj's home but he seems not to know that he should show his deep gratitude to the person but on the contrary, makes trouble for him. One

morning he was found dead in his bed. Nataraj becomes the most likely suspect because of this. But at the end of the story, from the temple public girl we know that Vasu actually killed himself when he was trying to drive away the mosquito resting on his temple. This can be regarded as a good metaphor of the colonial rule and the successor of their power. The elites, both from foreign country or from India, are actually the man-eaters. They take profits from the mass of India, but they never know that they should pay back or at least show their slightest gratitude to the people. On the contrary, they take them as prey only and maltreated them. Subalterns here are the victims in his writing and besides we also see that the author believe that the strength, muscle or power of the dominant groups is not a blessing but a tomb for themselves, like Vasu. But here the victims are described as obedient and passive and has no awareness of resistance and subjectivity.

His writing spans over 60 years and we can see that he is the direct witness of the modern transition of India and his writing can be regarded as the epic of modern India because the background of nearly all his fictions is an imaginary town called Malgudi, somewhere in South India, which is actually a sample for the change of whole India. Through his writings we can see what has been actually happening to India in the past 60 years. From his story we experience the change of their life, the change of their world value and the change of their way of looking at themselves. But actually from his writing, except the short stories collections, we can only find the speechless subaltern groups and we can hardly know what is actually happening to these groups of people. In quite a few of his fictions we can see that women are among the main characters, but they are not the real protagonists. From any sense it is not right to say that R.K Narayan is a liberalist or a feminist writer. What is especially impressive for most readers is that he

faithfully reflects the change of women's social position and also the change of their role in the households. He created a series of New Women who dare to pursue their own happiness, ignoring the confinement of the tradition or the codes of religion.

But to a certain degree, his writing about the modern transition of India only relates to the elites, or at most, the middle class. Even when he is writing about the resistance of women against the patriarchic hierarchy, he never mentions the females from the social bottom, the lower caste. He seems to forget the citizenship of such a breed of people and focuses his full attention on the groups that are closer to his readers, that is, the middle-class, fair skin males. Or in another way, we can conclude that he is trying to please them.

As to his contradictory attitudes toward modernity and tradition, we should not forget that at the first place he is a traditionalist. He seems, in some aspects, share the views of the nationalist elites, that is, India's tradition is the symbol of Indianness which can never be eliminated. On the other hand, he learns from the reality that the suppression upon women is not really from the western culture, but really from the oppressive factors of their own tradition. So in his fictions we can obviously notice that his New Women are the groups who have the courage to show contempt to their own tradition and pick up the new life, the western lifestyle. In this sense, western culture, different from postcolonial critic, is something that empowers women. That is the reason why R.K. Narayan is not often quoted by the postcolonial literary critics.

2. R. K. Narayan's Reflections on Subaltern Issue in India Modern Transition

The value of his writing is that he his writing, to a certain extent, portrayed the picture of what has been happening to India when the old civilization is experiencing the earth-quaking modern transition.

R. K. Narayan can not be counted as a liberalist or a feminist and he never claims to be either, but he really considers women issues consciously from the very beginning. In *A Dark Room* (1938), he faithfully describes the miserable conditions and the horrible oppressions imposed upon women. They are deprived of subjectivity and have no say in the family. The dark room is the only place where they can seek shelter when abused and also a prison for them.

But from *The Guide* (1956), women begin to be powerful and attain their subjectivity and their courage to break the codes of family and their religion. In this fiction the young girl Rosie has the courage to leave her husband, who only cares about himself, to find her own happiness. But in his writing the woman is something that the man Raju has to experience from tourist guide to a spiritual guide. She is not the real protagonist in the fiction. In a piece titled “Love and Lovers”, Narayan contrives an interview between a critic and himself and ponders about such an issue.

“... Are you going to tell me that you portray the individual in his fullness? There are areas you have neglected. For example, do you deal with man-woman relationship with any seriousness? Aren’t you prudish when it comes to sex?”

“Not exactly prudish, only I take the hint. When a couple, even if they happen to be characters in my own novel, want privacy, I leave the room; surely you wouldn’t expect one, at such moments, to sit on the edge of their bed and take notes ?” (P42, Love and Lovers)

This fiction, though lack of deep consideration of women issues, but generally we can see what is happening to the middle class women from *The Dark Room*, colonial period, to *The Guide*, a piece written after independence. We can see that women in India, not like male national elites who hold the instinctive hostility to western culture, begin to make use of the concepts, values and lifestyle of the West as a tool to subvert the oppressive forces.

That is only part of the story. Rosie is quite resistant and independent and has courage to seek the happiness of her own because she is a famous dancer and able to survive herself without the financial aid of anybody. But for most women, their destiny is much worse. For example, in the *Sign Painters of Malgudi*, the hero Srinivas moved to city and he seems try to escape his family responsibility. His wife, a submissive housewife, whose miserable conditions can be imagined, has to go to the city to look for her husband from a small village. This denotes her plight and poor economic conditions. The pain of migration is apparent. But from the text we can see the attitudes of Srinivas:

Srinivas pushed back his chair and rose. "What! What!" He became incoherent. He ran out on the landing and looked down: there he saw his wife and son standing below, with their trunks and luggage piled up on the ground. (P31, Sign Painter of Malgudi)

It is evident here that the wife and child of Srinivas were totally dependent on him. The pain and nervousness of her husband is apparent in the above lines when his wife complains of lack of correspondence between them. This irresponsible behavior of Srinivas has forced his wife and son to migrate to Malgudi.

"What is the matter with you? Why do you neglect us in this way? You have not written for months; what have I done that I should be treated

like this? Her voice was cracked with sorrow. Srinivas was baffled.
(P32, *The Sign Painters of Malgudi*)”

The pain of migration, negligence, irresponsibility and selfishness of Srinivas’ is conspicuous. It is also clear that his migration is voluntary in nature and more clearly speaking, a way to escape his responsibility.

The figure of Rangi (*The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, a temple public girl of Malgudi, can show us that the condition of Rosie is not the worst. She is the temple prostitute, and in being a woman of the temple, she is technically married to the god of that temple, who is in this case Krishna. She is both the highest woman and the lowest woman. She is openly looked down upon. Rangi also makes a very important comment when she says "Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my dharma". Ironically, The author is try to make us believe that Rangi has followed her dharma and acquired some sort of higher power, and then Rangi could have caused Vasu to end his life through the blow to his head. She is so unselfish that she is even willing to risk her personal happiness for the sake of the temple by aiding Nataraj in his attempt to stop Vasu from killing Kumar.

From this fiction, we can see that women are trapped in all kinds of Indian traditional rubbish and never have self-consciousness. They are made to believe that they are doing something devoted to all kinds of Dhamas. But if we check that in the reality we will discover that, sati, tonsure or other forms of Indian tradition sounds holy and appear to be the virtues of women, but actually it is the resource of women’s sufferings.

R.K. Narayan's fictions seldom put women at the center of the stage. In his fictions, other subaltern groups of lower castes or lower class are only speechless

figures without history, without their own emotions or subjectivity. In the fictions we can see that they are only the signifiers with mono-meaning. They do chores or humble jobs for the rich family and are generally working in unorganized sectors. In India, they are called servants, the signifier of status of a rich family.

From his fictions we can see that subaltern groups are actually the victims of the modern transition of India. His fiction, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, can also be interpreted as a metaphor of the miserable condition of Indian subaltern groups. The subaltern groups are obedient and suppressed by the elite groups under the disguise of so called democracy or in the name of protection of tradition. The deeply-rooted Indian tradition, such as the attitude about widowhood, the culture of dowries, the sati, the caste system and so on, and the state machine established in the name of democracy are just like Vasu, powerful and irresistible, become the man-eaters, devour the dignity or even the lives of ordinary people.

R.K. Narayan, though always tries to hide the facts by reducing the visibility of the subaltern groups in the fictions, still discloses the cruel reality that subaltern groups have to face. In his fiction *Financial Expert* he explains that in British India the Brits established community banks to create a system of orderly loans and it did give the poor people some way to go beyond the hopelessness of their lives. But when this system was implanted to India, things changed. Most of the poor people were constantly in debt to loan sharks and even were forced to commit suicide. However, his explanation is that the working folks weren't really much interested in thrift. But the fact is that loan-shark system mixed the traditional and modern was outrageously unfair to the poor.

If we want to find out the reason why subaltern groups, especially lower castes or

lower class, are disfavored, we might be disappointed. As to the miserable conditions of subaltern groups in India, scholars of different disciplines are trying to trace down the possible reasons. From his writing, especially his collections of short stories, such as *Malgudi Days*, *Banyan Trees* and *Some Other Stories*, we can see that the author does show great sympathy to the people who struggle for life. They are slightly mocked but serious considerations are generally absent. From the story we can see that the poverty of the subalterns was often attributed to the following reasons: personal quality of the social bottom, for example, ignorance, laziness, slyness and their close-mindedness. That is to say, he believes that the Subaltern groups should be responsible for the unfavorable conditions. For this I will discuss further in the third part.

3. Subalterns in Modern Transition of India: A perspective from social bottom

Maybe when we talk about the modern transition of India, we might first think of the IT enterprises, the democratic institutions inherited from Britain or its fast expansion of middle class. But that is only a very small part of the story. In the story we can only see the progress of social status of women, mainly the women from the middle class and the change of the life of a certain proportion of people. But for another portion of people, their life remains the same, or even worse. In this part I will first, based on the data from reliable resources I will portray a truer picture of what the life the Subalterns of India are living and what challenges Indian subaltern have to face in their everyday life.

Most scholars believe that democracy is the only effective treatment for poverty, injustice, inequality and they always show their moral superiority when they are

making judgment about whether it is modern or not or humane or not. I can say that they are only politically right. Actually for me these scholars are, on one hand, brainwashed by the west and holding democracy as a tag of India's progress, on the other hand, they are also brainwashed by their own culture. But when their own culture and democracy conflicts, they show contradictory double faces.

In the travelling, I am shocked by the countless large slums scattered around cities in India. Some Chinese scholars believe that democracy in India guarantees the rights of everybody and the evidence they produced is that poor people can have a patch of land as their shelter in big cities and they are slum-owners. I can not understand their local languages and I am unable to communicate with them, certainly I cannot testify whether their statement is right or not. But I still doubted it since we are not one of them and how can we know that they are really happy? I can't imagine people are willing to live in slums without clean water, without bathroom, medical care or even drainage. Besides, each year more than 6 thousands (quoted from the annual report of the National Crime Bureau of the Government of India, 1995) cases of dowry death in India and from 2000 this number increases to more than 7000 cases. Take 2005 alone for example, more than 7026 women died of dowry disputes (Quoted from the annual report issued on Nov. 29, 2006). The number doesn't include the women who were killed by all kinds of accidents which are not reported to the police or unable to find out the truth for ever. There is no reliable source to show us the exact number of widows, especially widows in the countryside who died in the fire or murdered by other forms. But the minimum number might amount to more than one thousand, according to the estimation of Dr. Annuppa Caleekal, an expert of women studies, let alone 40 million widows who are actually living the life worse than the dead or other possible life plight. However, in India it is nearly impossible for a certain

group of people to realize the social mobilization, even when they take the greatest efforts. On the newspapers of India, we, as outsiders, might be shocked to see, that even in some notable university, many democracy-minded scholars refuse to accept the students of lower castes as their postgraduates and force them to drop out, which fans heated discussion among people (see Suicide epidemic jolts South India in April 8, 2009, Deccan Herald).

Most Indian scholars I know actually turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what is happening to ordinary people.

Subaltern groups, except the middle class women and some lower caste politicians, are actually the victims of the modern transition of India. In R. K. Narayan fictions such groups are speechless. India is a democratic country, but from my observation and from the data I collected, subaltern groups never share the fruits of the modern transition of India. R.K Narayan didn't ponder such an issue. He simply knows how to present the stupid, ignorant sides of the poor people to please the readers who can actually read his works and survive him. He also arbitrarily believes that the poverty or miserable conditions should be attributed to their negative nature of the groups.

Many Indian scholars often attribute this to Colonial rule, the impact of the western culture, according to post-colonial critics of Indians or of Indian origin. So what they are trying to do is re-examining the colonial heritage. But I suggest that what they should do now is to re-examine their own traditional culture, which hold hostility to women and murder the dignity of other subaltern groups. If we are honest, we should be brave enough to confess that our culture is incompatible with the modernity, at least partly contradictory.

If we say that for China the biggest problem is the communist system, we shouldn't deny, if we are still honest, that the biggest problem for India is the democracy. India's Democracy is a system which never experience three "R". The first R is Renaissance. The Renaissance in the western countries happened because the westerners were aware of the overwhelmingly oppressive elements of the middle Ages culture. They turned back to their ancient culture, a culture full of humanity, to seek the resources for the liberation of their own. India really experienced Renaissance, the Bengal Renaissance. But that is even worse because they turned back to seek the resources of their own traditional culture to liberate themselves from the colonial rule when actually their own culture is more oppressive than the colonial. To be frank, their tradition is a confinement to most of the people. So we should hold this as a fact that Westerners foster the consciousness of humanity, liberal mind through the movement while Indians smothered or murdered the consciousness of humanity or liberty of most people brought in by colonizers.

The Reformation is a further step of the westerners to stay away from oppressive elements of their own religion. That is what we say secularism. India never experiences the Reformation, so Indian government has been trying to establish a new nation of secularism but failed again and again. Most Indians are still imprisoned in the religious-mindedness, which is actually the cornerstone of the hierarchy.

Nearly all the countries which can be counted as big nations experienced their own revolutions, such as England, France, Germany or even China. Through the revolutions, the old oppressive government institutions were subverted and the

new, modern government institutions were created. The government system of India inherited direct from the British colonizers and it mixed Indian tradition and the western modernity. We can say that such a government system, having some elements of liberty, is still oppressive.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The democracy of western countries, which experience three Rs, and the democracy of India, which didn't experience three Rs are totally different. It is different just as human and chimps are different, though they look much alike. This I think can really explain why Subaltern groups are actually suffering more in the modern transition and also helps us to understand why R. K. Narayan always cover the issue by reducing the visibility of Subaltern groups.

R. K. Narayan's Major Publications

1. Swami and Friends, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1935
2. The Bachelor of Arts, London, Nelson, 1937
3. The Dark Room, London, Macmillan, 1938
4. The English Teacher, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935
5. Mr Sampath (or The Printer of Malgudi), London, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1949
6. The Financial Expert, London, Methuen, 1952
7. Waiting for Mahatma, London, Methuen, 1955
8. The Guide, London, Methuen, 1958
9. The Man-Eater of Malgudi, New York, Viking Press, 1961
10. The Vendor of Sweats, New York Viking Press, 1976
11. The Painter of Signs, New York, Viking Press, 1976
12. A Tiger for Malgudi, New York, Viking Press, 1983
13. Talkative Man, London, Heinemann, 1986

14. The World of Nagaraj, London, Heinmann, 1990

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