

**R.K. Narayan's moral vision with special reference to  
The Bachelor of Arts**

**Narinder Kaur**

**Assistant Professor**

**GTB Khalsa College, Dasuya**

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**Abstract**

R.K. Narayan is one of the most important novelists of India along with the Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. But Narayan alone has the distinction of being a pure artist, one who writes especially for the aesthetic satisfaction and not for any ulterior motives like propagating his political or economic agendas. In all his novel, he presents a slice of life as he sees it, neutrally and justly. Sense of morality is the prime guiding factor in the lives of his characters in his works. The present work is an attempt in the direction of studying R.K.Narayan's moral vision with reference to his novel *The Bachelor of Arts*.

## **Introduction**

Morality can be defined according to the context, in which, it is being used. It covers wide field of human activities and behaviour. *Encyclopedia Britannica* expresses morality as a “Standard of human behavior determined either subjectively or objectively and based on what is considered ethically right or wrong.” A.S. Hornby’s *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* also defines morality as concerning principles of right and wrong behavior, ethical or the people’s sense of what is right and just. Moral values give happiness and satisfaction in human life. Morality is a spontaneous instinct. He neither denounces them nor upholds them. But this kind of unbiased objectivity is not easy to carry on. In the words of Graham Greene:

“If he (a writer) allows himself to take sides, moralise, propaganda, he can easily achieve the extra literary interest, but if he follows Mr. Narayan’s methods he stakes all on his creative power.” (P: 108)

It is great achievement of R.K. Narayan’s creative power that he has described the Indian people and the Indian way of life with an abundant measure of success, without trying to moralize or philosophize. He is doyen of Indian English novelists who exquisitely portrays basic human sensibilities such as morality, humanity, loneliness etc. In his entire novel, he presents a slice of life as he sees it, neutrally and justly. He tries to give his readers the joy of a purely creative artist. Narayan depicts the middle- class men and women who are seen by him striving to be free from the slavery of the orthodox traditions. Sense of morality is the prime guiding factor in the lives of his characters in his works. His novel acquaints us with a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverend openness before life and marked moral intensity. And his observations reveal his character’s ethical sensibility. His fictional world of Malgudi has a firm creative base built on certain traditions, values and ethos of life. He describes trivial eccentricities of his characters to expose their moral weaknesses. But Narayan does not lack sympathy for his characters. Each one of his characters wicked or virtuous is drawn with extraordinary delicacy and tenderness. In his sympathetic hands they turn into interesting and amusing figures and make place very colorful by their presence and by their actions. There is no place for any great social, economic, and political changes that have been taken place in the novels. The present work is an attempt in the direction of studying R.K.Narayan’s moral vision with reference to his novel *The Bachelor of Arts*.

In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan juxtaposes the clash between tradition and modernity. Chandran strives to be free from the bounds of traditions, rituals and social rules and regulations. But our customs are so deep- rooted in our conscious that we cannot negate or violate them at our will.

And those, who try to change the course of accepted ethical tenets, have to return to them later or sooner. Otherwise they are labeled as outcast. And human life is impossible without social environment. Through many 'ins and outs' of Chandran, Narayan has emphasized the need of morality and sense of belonging. He does not expose any particular individual. He takes the character as a medium to convey his message. Human life is a gift from the divine and those who make misuse of it are doubly sinners of the God and of himself.

*The Bachelor of Arts* deals with themes of human struggles with the worldly affairs and eventual beginnings of self- relation, as the protagonist experienced in the novel. The protagonist is Chandran, a Malgudi youth of twenty, whose career at college is just average. After his graduation in 1931, he has no straight and sure way to walk on, no clear cut mission which will lead him to a successful life. On the other hand the society demands on him to make them know about his future plans: "within six months of becoming a graduate Chandran began to receive from relatives and elderly friends of the family as to what he should do with himself. Till this time it had never occurred to him that he ought to be doing anything at all. But now, wherever he went he was pestered with questions, "Now what do you propose to do?" Chandran avoids commitments. He has "a vague desire to go to England and do something there," he has notion of obtaining a doctorate from London University and returning to India to teach in a small college. This way the problem of unemployment misleads the youth of the time. But this idea can't be materialized.

After, some time he falls in love with a girl called Malathi. But in India such romance is against moral codes of society. So he has to keep it within his own fancy. In his society marriage has to be arranged on a commercial, caste, family and astrological basis. "to the dust-pot with your customs," says Chandran to his mother, but the customs win. Chandran's horoscope becomes a hurdle in the path of their marriage. Malathi got married with her cousins. And Chandran packed to Madras. He was full of despair. After a day or two he disappears having decided to escape from his wretchedness by assuming the grab of a sanyasi. He is renouncing the world as "an alternative to suicide" in order to get his revenge on the society. But it is clear that Chandran's motives in entering upon his eight months spell as sanyasi are selfish rather than genuinely spiritual. But we see that this way of escape is characteristically Indian. This escape is symbolic of Chandran's dead inner instincts. There is no shelter beyond the reality of life. One can find some way- out only in the value based social structure. He has left all efforts. He is walking on an easy road, which can't lead him to the satisfaction of his desires. It is a temporary refuge.

Gradually he realizes the painful transition from romance to reality. He discovers the gap between fancy and facts, dream and the dead. The resultant despair engulfs Chandran in a whirl of confused action and escape. Finally, he realizes some self-knowledge beyond the veil of romantic illusions about love and life. Thus, we see that the novel, primarily, deals with the hopes and aspirations, delusions and dilemmas, and fancies and frustrations of Chandran.'

Chandran's experience as Sanyasi brings him to his senses. He realizes that Malathi was merely a infatuation. After it he decides to return home abandoning his attempts to be individualistic. He gets a job, and family negotiations provide him with a bride; he rejects romantic love and accepts with delights the wife found for him in the time honoured way. The conflicts generated by education subside as Chandran surrenders to tradition. And peace comes with the acceptance of the old Indian way of doing things. Chandran tries to find footholds in life. With the advice of his friend, Mohan, he takes up the Daily Messenger Agency. In spite of Stiff competition he is able to procure the agency with the help of his uncle. In procuring it he has used short-cut method. May be some more deserving candidates has to lose it. This shows lack of system and rules in the social set up and the administration. People adopt all sorts of means to climb the ladder of success. By hook or by crook they must have the seat. They don't hesitate to stake the ethical codes of the society. After getting the hold of the agency Chandran devotes himself completely to his work. Soon he gets settled in his new- found profession. And to his pleasant surprise he finds all the divine virtue Sushila. Their horoscopes have already matched. Finally, they got married. Narayan writes: "Chandran returned a new man, his mind full of Sushila, the fragrance of jasmine and sandal paste, the smokiness of the sacred fire. Of brilliant lights, music, gaiety, and laughter."(p.164) Chandran has thus realized that the final refuge for us is in the world of reality. Man can live calmly and happily in this world.

Narayan does not paint his characters as completely good or bad. In spite of vices and virtues, everyman possesses some positive traits. In *The Bachelor of Arts* all the characters are presented as human beings. Time's demand and the pressure of the situation put a man into right or wrong direction. But any kind of cheap escapism, hypocrisy and pretence cannot sustain life beyond a point. The true possibilities of love and life can be realized only through the honest means of living. In *The Bachelor of Arts* all the characters are life-like, convincing and this- worldly. Chandran's mother has been portrayed like all Hindu mothers. Her demand of the best dowry was the social evil at that time. Nothing unbelievable or immoral takes place in the novel. No supernatural or

necromental powered character, like Dr. Faustus, in Marlow's *Doctor Faustus* or Prospero, in W. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, has been portrayed in *The Bachelor of Arts*.

With the help of ironic weapon Narayan exposes the weak points of his characters. And his sole purpose, in doing so, is to mend the ways of the drifting actors. He makes the characters to realize their sense of reality. No one can escape the sense of belonging to the facts of life. It does not aim at reforming, but to make people aware of their responsibility. It is the surface irony of social critic, and not the deeper irony, which Proudhou characterized as; 'the familiar spirit of the philosopher, the mistress of Truth,'

Graham Green introduces *The Bachelor of Arts* as the "the story of a young Indian in his last year at college, and his first year of freedom." (P.vii). This charming, unusual, and amusing novel of youth underlines the tragic- comic vision of Narayan. Narayan has presented a realistic and amusing picture of college and home life of a middle- class young man, Chandran. It also brings out the pathos of a star-crossed young life. The moral digression of the characters leads them to a pathetic situation. And the element of pathos is not harsh here rather it has dealt with a delicate, tender, and restrained touch. Graham Greene says, "some reader will admire it for its honour, some for its sense of implicit, I was going to say tragedy but that word is too- blatant for a pathos as delicate as the faint discoloration of ivory with age...But it would be wrong to emphasize more deeply than Mr. Narayan himself had said and the poetic background: The honour of the book is enough to enchant"(p: x). The purpose behind the use of this fragile pathetic whip is not to heighten the comic effect of the novel. Narayan has made use of it consciously to ridicule the follies and foibles of his character.

Narayan has adopted a dual perspective in *The Bachelor of Arts*. We see the world through Chandran's eyes and Chandran and the world through Narayan's. it is the latter perspective that yields most of the irony in this work. This good honoured irony lays bare some archetypal failing of young Chandran. Several episodes reveal the enormous self-importance and self- centredness of this callous youth. Thus, finally we see that *The Bachelor of arts* is a delectable story of youth with its delicacy and extravagance, beauty and sadness. Thus realism of the portrayal is wrapped in a mild texture of irony, nut it is always enlivened with an urbanity and charity. And thus, *The Bachelor of Arts* reveals that all embracing range of comic vision. And through this comic vein Narayan has exposed the follies and foibles of the Malgudian society. And thus he has emphasized the need of morality, which is the real base of smooth life.

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