

A puzzle from Tharoor versus Narayan: why write in English?

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Abstract. Shashi Tharoor criticizes R.K. Narayan for ignoring the English canon and for reading like a translation. A question that arises if these criticisms are sound is: why write in English at all? I propose an answer.

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Shashi Tharoor criticizes distinguished Indian novelist and short story writer R.K. Narayan in multiple ways. One criticism is this:

I was, I must admit, particularly frustrated to find that Narayan was indifferent to the wider canon of English fiction and to the use of the English language by other writers, Western or Indian. Worse, his indifference was something of which he was inordinately proud. (2001)

Tharoor also writes:

Narayan's words were just what they seemed; there was no hint of meanings lurking behind the surface syllables, no shadow of worlds beyond the words. Indeed, much of Narayan's prose reads like a translation. (2001)

This combination of criticisms gives rise to a puzzle. Why did Narayan bother to write in English at all? If he really was indifferent to English literature and how others use the English language and really reads like translation, then why bother? (I don't actually agree with these criticisms, by the way.)

One speculative answer that occurred to me is that elites sometimes communicate with one another and sometimes the masses in enigmatic and even paradoxical ways. If they

are discontent, they don't directly say, "We are unhappy because of..." rather some puzzling phenomenon arises. "What is that about?" the audience wonders. (Making some mountain out of a seeming molehill, or overlooking a sensible position, or suddenly speaking French, etc. For all I know, it's better for them to communicate in that way.) So maybe the upper tiers of one literary system decided to communicate discontent to another by the enigmatic means of the qualities Tharoor flags, in the quotations. But that would still leave the question of what the message was, assuming there is a message, an exact source of discontent. And it seems difficult to believe that all this would be written as an enigmatic communication of discontent.

Reference

Tharoor, S. 2001. Comedies of Suffering. Available at:

http://shashitharoor.in/writings_essays_details/180