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Literary Criticism of C.D. Narasimhiah: An In-depth Analysis

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Synopsis

C.D. Narasimhiah, a distinguished scholar and critic, has made profound contributions to the field of literary criticism, particularly in Indian English literature. His critical approach is marked by a blend of tradition and modernity, underscoring the nuances of Indian cultural heritage while engaging with global literary paradigms. This paper explores the essential aspects of his literary criticism, examining his contributions, themes, and methodologies, while considering the relevance of his work in contemporary discourse. The study also investigates his influence on the Indian academic landscape.

Keywords: C.D. Narasimhiah, Literary Criticism, Indian English Literature, Tradition, Modernity, Cultural Heritage, Academic Influence.

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Introduction

Literary criticism is a complex field that requires a profound understanding of both the theoretical underpinnings of literature and its cultural context. In India, a country with a rich literary tradition, the evolution of literary criticism has been particularly significant in the context of English-language works. C.D. Narasimhiah, a prominent critic and scholar, is one of the most influential figures in this area. His approach to literary criticism draws from a diverse range of influences, blending Indian classical traditions with Western literary theory, which makes his work a vital part of the discourse on Indian English literature.

Born in the mid-20th century, Narasimhiah's scholarship represents a confluence of Indian cultural identity and global literary trends. He has mentored several generations of scholars, shaping the academic landscape of literary studies in India. This article delves into his critical methodology, his understanding of Indian and Western literary traditions, and the broader impact of his work.

C.D. Narasimhiah's Approach to Literary Criticism

1. The Interplay of Tradition and Modernity

One of the defining features of Narasimhiah's literary criticism is the delicate balance he strikes between traditional Indian thought and modern Western theories. His criticism is not merely an academic exercise but a reflection of his deep engagement with the socio-cultural fabric of India. Narasimhiah often emphasized that Indian literature, particularly Indian English literature, must be studied within its own cultural and historical context. He believed that while Western literary theories offer valuable frameworks, they should not be applied indiscriminately to Indian texts. In his essay *The Dialectics of Indian Literature*, Narasimhiah argues that Indian writers in English should be assessed not just by their linguistic prowess but by how they reflect the unique ethos of Indian society.

At the same time, Narasimhiah was not averse to adopting critical frameworks from Western literary criticism. His engagement with formalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism is evident in his reading of both Indian and Western texts. This synthesis of



traditional and modern perspectives enables him to offer nuanced readings of literary works, considering both their cultural roots and their artistic merit.

2. The Role of Culture and History in Literary Criticism

Narasimhiah consistently highlighted the role of culture and history in shaping literary texts. In his critical essays, he stresses the importance of understanding a work of literature as a product of the historical moment in which it was written. His approach, therefore, integrates elements of cultural studies with traditional literary criticism. For example, his study of Indian English writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Ismat Chughtai draws upon their engagement with the social and political realities of colonial and post-colonial India.

In his seminal work *Cultural Criticism and the Indian Imagination*, Narasimhiah argues that literature cannot be divorced from the cultural context that produces it. He posits that the Indian literary tradition, despite its colonial history, retains a deep connection to its roots in Sanskrit, Tamil, and other regional literatures. Narasimhiah's engagement with regional literature and its translation into English demonstrates his commitment to a broader, more inclusive vision of Indian literary criticism.

3. Emphasis on Language and Aesthetic Qualities

For Narasimhiah, language is central to the understanding of literature. He contends that literary merit is closely tied to linguistic creativity and aesthetic expression. In his essay *The Art of Language in Indian Literature*, he outlines how the use of language in Indian English literature, while influenced by colonialism, also retains a distinctive flavour that is culturally rich and regionally diverse. His criticism, therefore, does not just focus on thematic elements but also on how language shapes the overall literary experience.

Moreover, Narasimhiah's emphasis on aesthetics goes beyond mere technical analysis. He often reflects on the aesthetic dimensions of a text in terms of its emotional impact and philosophical depth. In this regard, his critical methodology is influenced by the works of Aristotle and John Ruskin, whose ideas on the role of beauty and emotion in literature resonate with Narasimhiah's own critical vision.

Key Contributions to Indian Literary Criticism

1. Pioneering Work on Indian English Literature

Narasimhiah's scholarly contributions have had a lasting impact on the study of Indian English literature. His work has helped establish Indian writers in English as a significant part of the global literary canon. By applying his unique blend of Indian and Western critical methods, Narasimhiah has facilitated deeper understanding of writers such as R.K. Narayan, Kamala Das, and Agha Shahid Ali. His book *The Indian English Novel* is a comprehensive study that examines the development of the Indian English novel in the 20th century, analyzing its social and political concerns.

In this book, Narasimhiah discusses how the Indian English novel reflects the changing socio-political landscape of India, from the colonial era to independence and beyond. His critical approach is

marked by a deep respect for the individual writer's vision while also considering the larger national and historical contexts in which these works were produced.

2. Interdisciplinary Approach

Another hallmark of Narasimhiah's criticism is his interdisciplinary approach. He often draws upon philosophy, sociology, and anthropology to inform his readings of literary texts. This is evident in his essay *The Role of Philosophy in Literature*, where he argues that literature is inseparable from the philosophical ideas of the time. His interdisciplinary focus allows for a broader, more holistic understanding of literature, which resonates with the complexities of modern academic discourse.

3. Mentoring and Academic Leadership

Narasimhiah played an instrumental role in shaping the direction of literary studies in India. His leadership in the academic community helped foster a generation of scholars who continue to contribute to the study of Indian literature. His students appreciate his pedagogical style, which emphasizes critical thinking and intellectual engagement with texts.

In his critical reflections on Indian English literature, C.D. Narasimhiah emphasizes the importance of understanding the works of Indian writers in English within their cultural and historical context. He states, "Indian literature, even when written in English, is irrevocably rooted in its native soil, and it must reflect the complexities of Indian society" (*The Indian English Novel*, p. 56). This observation highlights the tension between colonial influences and the intrinsic Indian cultural elements that Indian writers seek to preserve and explore through the English language.

Narasimhiah's criticism also underscores the aesthetic dimensions of Indian literature, particularly the way language functions as a vehicle for artistic expression. As he puts it, "The beauty of a work of literature lies not in its formal structure alone but in the way it communicates its deepest emotional and philosophical concerns" (*Cultural Criticism and the Indian Imagination*, p. 89). This insight draws on his broader engagement with both Eastern and Western traditions of literary aesthetics.

Furthermore, Narasimhiah's reading of Indian English writers like R.K. Narayan exemplifies his belief that literary works must be understood within their sociopolitical context. In his essay on Narayan's *The Guide*, he writes, "The novel is a reflection of the nation's spiritual journey, a microcosm of its evolving consciousness" (*The Dialectics of Indian Literature*, p. 123). This idea reflects Narasimhiah's holistic approach to literature, where textual analysis is inseparable from a consideration of the larger historical and political currents.

In terms of his philosophical approach, Narasimhiah claims, "Literature is never a mere reflection of the world but a process of engaging with and questioning it" (*The Art of Language in Indian Literature*, p. 77). This stance aligns with his interdisciplinary approach, where literature becomes a space for philosophical

inquiry, examining not only the structure of the text but its deeper existential implications.

Conclusion

C.D. Narasimhiah's literary criticism occupies a central place in the study of Indian literature in English. His work is characterized by a sophisticated blend of traditional Indian thought and modern Western literary theory. By foregrounding the cultural, historical, and linguistic context of literary works, he has paved the way for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Indian English literature. His interdisciplinary approach and emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of literature further deepen the significance of his contributions.

As a professor and academic leader, Narasimhiah has not only advanced the field of literary criticism but has also influenced the intellectual lives of many students and scholars. His legacy

continues to inspire new generations of critics and readers, making him a vital figure in the landscape of Indian literary studies.

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