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A Library Without Books

R. K. Narayan

- Bring out the satire in R K Narayan's essay *A Library Without Books*
- Or, "...and books no budget yet" ...Bring out the tone of irony in *A Library Without Books* in the light of the above statement.
- Central idea of the essay *A Library Without Books*

"He published some", remarks William Walsh in his *Other Works* to sum up the essays of R. K. Narayan in a single sentence, "but they are unremarkable." From this statement it is clear that the *oeuvre* of novels and other fictional writings of Narayan have paved the way of grave for his non-fictional essays. As a result, most of Narayan's essays remain invisible in the clear light of day of Indian writing in English. Even many readers hardly know about them. One such so called off-bit essay is *A Library Without Books*. The very title compels our mind to peep into the inner texture of the text. Generally, we find humourist Narayan in his novels. But here he holds the pen to make an anatomy of a so-called library with the blade of satire. He portrays the picture of a library where the more important than matter.

At the very beginning the essayist says that he is not in favour of using the term 'library movement' because, according to him the word movement connotes a revolutionary sense. But in present day, for him, this becomes an abstract idea without any essence in it. Unlike movement, it also does not aim at any 'goal'. In his opinion a present-day library has everything- bookshelves, furniture, locks, keys, register, voucher and statistics-except reading. So, it is like a temple without the deity or a body without the soul. The procedure of accessing a certain library is more important to the library authority than reading book. The essayist thus says, "I sometimes wonder if they would not do better to keep dummy books with gilt titles in sealed *almirahs*, so that they may only be seen and counted and never taken out, which seems to be the best way of keeping a library secure, above reproach from auditors and with unimpeachable stock register."

The ink of the pen of the writer does not fail to depict the naked reality behind establishing a library. According to him, it is used as an object to campaign political propaganda. In this way the actual purpose of a library remains in darkness and for the readers it has become a 'matter of cess, authority, statistics and funds.

The essayist then, stings the pin of satire in the process of establishment of library. According to him the sole importance is given in the infrastructure of a library rather than books. The essayist thus says, "Recently when I visited a certain important town I saw a new library building coming up at feverish speed. The name boards of the architect, contractor, electrician and sanitary engineers stood upon all sides of the compound in letters of gold. The ground was



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swept, lawns were laid and watered desperately and all workmen were finishing up their tasks by gaslight.”

Further enquiry reveals that the impulsiveness is all for the official inauguration of the library building by an eminent person. The more the essayist proceeds, the more interesting things come to the light. It is revealed that a certain amount of money is sanctioned for different purposes. The only thing for which there is no budget is book.

So, it is very clear that throughout the essay the satirical tone pings the inner psyche of the readers again and again. The subject matter of the present essay, somehow, in an oblique way, reminds us the theme of the short-story *Tota Kahini (The Story of a Parrot)* by Rabindranath Tagore. As the manner was prioritised more there than the matter i.e. education and the parrot or more particularly the learner was brought into the world of death, in the same way the library becomes a library without books.

To conclude, though the veil of novels does not allow light into the realm of non-fiction of R. K. Narayan, this essay, however, is enough to discard the remarks of Shymla Narayan in his review of *Reluctant Guru*:

“Of course, all the essays are not equally bad, and most of them would make good material for the commuter to kill the time with. They do not deserve to be published in book form, just because they are the work of a famous novelist; the only purpose they serve is to show the weakness in Narayan’s Writing.”