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R.K.NARAYAN: A VERSATILE GENIUS OF INDO-ANGILION SHORT STORY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The short story, as the designation displays, is a story that is short. Emerging from earlier oral storytelling traditions, the short story has grown to encompass a body of work as diverse as a world of literature itself. The short story is a work of fiction that can be read in one sitting. It is a work of prose-fiction with fictional features as-plot, characters, setting, dialogue, narration or description and impression. It is more living and significant. It is like filling ocean into a pitcher. In short, it is a complete fiction within a very narrow space. That is why all the Prophets and scholars used story for their teaching and expressing knowledge.

Singleness of aim and unity of effect are the two great canons by which the artistic quality of a good story is judged. *"The art of the short story has now become so much more exacting than that of the novel that it excels the latter in point of workmanship, insisting as it does on a complete adaption of means to an end, in order that it may give us maximum aesthetic and recreative pleasure."*¹

Short stories writers from India such as *Mulk Raj Anand*, *R.K. Narayan* and *Raja Rao* responded to the nationalist movement during Gandhian Era each in his own way- *Mulk Raj Anand*, the social activist, presenting a true vision of Indian life; *Raja Rao* experimenting with *"detached involvement with his perception of the average as positive, exploring the nature of life and reality"* and *R.K.Narayan* presenting true picture of India with humour and compassion, the energy of ordinary life. Narayan is a pure Indian writer from the beginning to the end of his career. Though he received his higher education at Cambridge in London, his subject matter ever remained purely Indian because he was attached with the Indian soil and also loved his country immensely. He displays traditional Hindu mythology and legends in stories of modern events.

Keywords: Prose-fiction, aesthetic, experiment, literary, humor, tradition, compassion.

The Modern Short Story emerged in Germany, USA, France and Russia simultaneously in 19th century. Although the short story has existed from the earliest times, it had to wait up till the 19th century to be developed into a distinct form of literary art side by side with the novel in America

and Russia. This art evolved as a distinct literary form in need of the human spirit for creative utterance arising out of *"its milieu and the moment in the history of the race."* (Taine)

Due to availability of vast readers, social Media, e-books and vast market, the short story

writers of today is the freshest of all artists. Writers get full freedom in the expression with vast experiment in modern short story. Perhaps the old story-telling tradition is being followed in the modern short story. So, this is a superb and excellent literary device today and cannot be set aside as "Short."

The greatest gift of the British Raj to the Indian Sub-continent is probably the English language and its rich and versatile literature. Due to English education, the Indian intelligentsia, men and women of letters who had sufficient mastery over the language, thought differently. They tried their hand at poetry, prose and fiction. It was a unique combination. The Indian literatures were describing their environs and social milieu in a strange language that belonged to a faraway land. Having mixed with British, they enjoyed tremendous advantage both in terms of exposure and language skills. Interestingly, the recognition of Indian writing in English as a potential threat to world literature came to be acknowledged by the end of the 19th century. Literary historians trace its genesis to ancient Indian classics like the *Panchatantra*, the *fables of Brihatkhata*, *Kathasaritsagar* or *Yoga-Vashista* and *tales of Vikramaditya*.

Indian English short story authors deals with the present various shades of joy, and sorrow, of fidelity and doubt, of reality and ideality with full potency, plenty and variety. The Indian short story in English faced many ups and down and now exploring the green valley of happiness and hope as also the grey field of pain and despair as well as displayed their brilliance in the master hands of great writers as *Mulk Raj Anand*, *Anita Mehta*, *Raja Rao*, *R.K.Narayan*, *Jayanta Mahapatara* and so on.

In the history of Indian English literature, the three writers who are considered as classic are *Mulk Raj Anand*, *Raja Rao* and obviously *R.K.Narayan*. It would not be unfair to designate them as the "TRIUMVIRATE". I would try to highlights the contribution of *R.K.Narayan* as a great short writer and his treatment of techniques and new experiments in his approach.

The first and foremost aspect of *Narayan* is that he is an excellent story teller who can narrate his stories quite effectively and convince persuade

his readers about the characters and situations in his short stories. *Narayan*, in his long literary career wrote novels and short stories with equal skill and dexterity. Here one thing is very praiseworthy that most writers start their career as a short story writer and then become novelist and end their literary career having become novelist and left writing stories but *Narayan* did the opposite never left writing short stories. He wrote both novels and short stories side by side and has the fame of writer of both.

Most educated Indian who has must heard *R.K.Narayan*. But few would recognize *Rasipuram Krishnaswamiyer Narayanswamiyer* which is *Narayan's* given name. Until recently the Tamil Brahmin names were three-in-one. First the village, then the father's name, followed by the given name of the individual. *Narayan* began his literary career by writing short stories which appeared in "The Hindu" and he also worked as a Mysore Correspondent of "Justice", a newspaper from Madras. He wrote many short stories and published them in volumes as *Malgudi Days*(1941), *Dadu and others Stories*(1943), *Cyclone and other Stories*(1947), *An Astrologer's Day and others Stories*(1947), *Lawley Road*(1956), and *A Hosre and Two Goats*(1970) etc.

The "Author's Introduction" is a very vital document of *R.K.Narayan's* ideas on short stories. It was annexed to the short story collection-"*Malgudi Days*" in 1981. In it, he admits, "I enjoy writing short story." He further says, "Unlike the novel which emerges from relevant, minutely worked-out details, the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of details, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax."² So, according to *Narayan*, the short writer has to be minimalist in the presentation of characters and foregrounding of situations. His idea that a short story in order to be aesthetically satisfying depends on suggestive, centrality of idea and climaxing of situations is appropriate.

Narayan points out not only on the length and structure of a short story but also he is equally very clear on the thematic context and characterization. He has his own idea of a short story. He said that the "story" is long-ranging in its

implications. It may refer to "the news reporter's use of their as well as to "the literary profundities on the subjects of plot, climax, structure and texture with do's and don'ts for writer. He adds, "A story when a personality passes through a crisis of spirit or circumstances." He displays that in the stories of *Malgudi Days*, the central characters are almost confronted with "some kind of crisis" which is either resolved or with which the characters concerned continued to live on. He also believed that the stories focus themselves on a special or significant moment in someone's life.

Our patriarch of Indian English literature, *Narayan*, highlights the imaginary little town of *Malgudi*-a microcosm of life in southern India during the 20th century. In the Author's Introduction, *Narayan* presents *Malgudi* as the common background or setting of all the stories, first introduced in "*Swami and Friends*." He presents a graphic picture of everyday life of *Malgudians*.

"*Malgudi* typifies the typical Indian lives, scenes and situations. The old and new Indian society are found interwovenThe various facts of Indian life have been painted in the life of the people of *Malgudi*. The *Malgudi*...the expressions of various problems and predicament of middle class society particularly. *Narayan's* characters symbolise wisdom, courage, loyalty and treachery and deal with the weal and woe of the individuals in their private life."³

With their little joys and sorrows, the small but significant moments of elation and despair in the day to day life of *Malgudi* that is Indian alternative to *Anthony Trollope's Barchin* and *Hardy's Wessex*. Like *Barchin* or *Wessex*, *Malgudi* gives an impression of the illusion of reality. *Malgudi* has a definite geographical status appearing to be a small town in south India. It gives the frequent references to the social customs, religious ceremonies, food habits, characters with their names, general habits and relationships resembling with south India. He presents the stories of ordinary people who are follower of Hindu principles to guide them through the hardship and dilemmas of modern life. He makes no attempt to present India through *Malgudi* in an exotic light for the sake of foreign readers. But

Narayan himself quotes, "I am often asked, "Where is *Malgudi*?" All I can say is that it is imaginary and not to be found on any map If I explain that *Malgudi* is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics of *Malgudi* seem to me universal...I can detect *Malgudi* characters even in New York...*Malgudi* has been only a concept but has proved good enough for my purposes."⁴

It has been said that *Malgudi* is the real hero of *Narayan's* short stories and novels. The same physical features, the same landmarks-Albert Mission High School, Mampi Hills, Lawley Road, The Taj, Bombay Ananad Bhavan, River Sarayu, Municipal Office- appear and reappear in one after another. This provides a rare unity and continuity to *Narayan's* work as a short-story writer.

His many short stories and novels are interwoven and counterpart to each other. Many of his short stories throw light on the full length novels. *Narayan's* earlier short stories comprise preliminary sketches: these stories appear again in a slightly altered form in his novels; or they contain the germinating idea for a crisis in his novels. For example "Father's Help" and "A Hero" are stories of *Swami* who is also the hero of *Narayan's* first novel. "*The White Flower*" narrates the incident which more or less decides the hero's fate in "*The Bachelor Of Arts*." Again, The Roman Image in "*An Astrologer's Day*" has traces with the eccentric activities of *China Dorai* in "*The Sweet Vendor*" and "*Such Perfection*." In the same collection where the sculptor feels that he must chip a portion of the *Nataraja* image he has carved so that the world may not be destroyed, is recalled in *The Sweet-Vendor* where *China Dorai* explains how humanity just cannot bear to see perfection.

"The Watchman" in the collection "An Astrologer's Day" saved a woman when she was just trying to commit suicide by drowning. He convinced her and sent her to her house. But in "The Dark Room" he does not take the lady with him and thinks the next day that very likely she did drown herself. After many years, he saw a woman like the girl whom he saved but his surprised, the woman who was with her husband and three children, either does not or will not recognize him. *Savitri* too,

had three children and decided not to recognize her life saver, Mari.

Narayan sometimes is compared to well-known Russian short story write, *Chekov*. Earlier he had been influenced by *John O' London* and *Punch* as models in the early pre independence stories. One thing is also very noteworthy that *Narayan* has the resembling of *O. Henry*, a great American short writer. Like *Henry*, his stories have beautiful plot and climax and always end with surprising ending. Like *Chekov*, he selected certain moments of supreme importance in the life of his characters and then explores these moments with care. His characters have their virtues and drawbacks. But *Narayan* presented them in his own specific style and skill. He brands them a true *Malgudians*, treats them and makes them universal personality with touch of simplicity and genuineness. He resembles with *Chekov* in his treatment of humour and pathos. "As in the stories of *Chekov* so *Narayan's*, the old narrative with a well-developed plot is replaced by a number of apparently casual bits, incidents, patches and slices of life, welded together not so much by the plot as by the characters or the atmosphere. *Narayan* resembles *Chekov* in his detached, aesthetic attitude towards life also. Like him he also paints life as it is, without caring for any immediate or remote aims. Like the Russian master, his objectivity is also not of a cold and indifferent variety, as followed by *Maupassant* and other naturalists. His receptivity and his capacity for compassion are both enormous. Though like a detached artist he never identifies himself with his characters, yet he never loses his sympathy for them either."⁵

Narayan is the only pure artist who writes for art's sake and not for life's sake. He presents the life of *Malgudi* as he feels or sees it with perfect sincerity, carefulness and truthfulness. His stories are uniformly compact and are told in his usual seemingly artless style. His stories beautifully exhibits the ups and down of the common people in their lives. The author has a deep insight into the life of an average middle classman. He describes clearly the problems of ordinary people in humorous and ironical manner. He is the true master of humor, irony, realism and romance. He accepts the social system prevailing in the country and portrays it

realistically without making an attempt to castigate the ills of the society. He makes no attempt to present India in an exotic light for the sake of foreign readers. After his vast success as a writer of novels and short stories, he travelled all over the world and learnt more about progress but it did not mend his writing in any way. He continued to write as a true and faithful Indian writer. He never wrote to create sensation, or earn cheap popularity. He was just a true Indian artist who wrote for art's sake.

Let's see an example of *Narayan's* observation through a child who is "my first day out" about market road of *Malgudi*:

"As I watched the pictures my mind went off into fantastic speculations while my tongue recited holy verse. "Was the eagle a sort of aero plane for *Vishnu*? *Lakshmi* stands on lotus! How can anyone stand on a lotus flower without crushing it?"

His only aim to write short story is to amuse and entertain his readers by presenting before them life's little ironies, realistically and vividly. His writing are entirely free any ideological prejudices. He penned down nature in its true colors and fine beauty. All his stories are written in an easy simple language which presents no difficulty for his readers.

The most precious technique used by *Narayan*, as I think, is his use of child psychology. He loved children and equally treated innocent child, animal and human life around him. The "*Thumbi*" pieces illustrate this amply. (The name means the nectar seeking butterfly.) His stories are popular account of a series of juvenile incidents and experiences in the lives of innocent students or children of *Malgudi*. Their experiences, imagination, likes and dislikes are a graphic reflection of the general psyche of an average Indian school boy. It is very interesting to watch the response made by the innocent children against particular crisis like examination, rivalry, religious tension and adulthood. One thing, I also came to conclusion that children and their innocence are central theme of most of the short story by *Narayan*. This brings beauty and charm to his stories and universal acceptance. He has immense empathy with nature also so he experiences joy everywhere.

One of the most vital reason for which *Narayan* enjoys universal popularity among all sections is that he has mastered the art of storytelling through English language. His stories have Indian theme and characters but he presents to the world through English language with western technique and execution. His stories have the spirit of Indianness showing their social, economic, religious and cultural contexts. His stories are incredibly easy to read because they are written in simple English contrary to the expectation of upper scholar class. He presents his character, completely Indian, their life and death, tradition, customs, thought etc in English. The inherent charm of ordinary people speech and conversation without any artificiality and pedantry immediately connect the readers with characters in his stories. *"Narayan's stories begin with realistic settings and everyday happenings in the lives of a cross-section of Indian society, with characters of all classes. Gradually fate or chance, oversight or blunder, transforms mundane events to preposterous happenings. Unexpected disasters befall the hero as easily as unforeseen good fortune. The characters accept their fates with an equanimity that suggests the faith that things will somehow turn out happily, whatever own motivations or actions. Progress, in the form of western-imported goods and attitudes, combined with bureaucratic institutions, meets in Malgudi with long-held conventions, beliefs and ways of doing things. The modern world can never win a clear-cut victory because Malgudi accepts only what it wants, according to its own private logic."*⁹

Even he does not hesitate to represents his rustic Tamil with Standard English most of time; *"Telephone"* and *"don't stand there and make donkey noise."* are few examples to present his rustic background and speech. He also employed the use of nuanced dialogue prose with Tamil overtones based on the nature of his characters. *Narayan* can be regarded as a maverick in his treatment of English. He uses English as magic to spellbind the readers of the world and has universal acceptance.

"His talent goes far beyond mere capacity with words. In fact, *Narayan's* immense flexibility, adaptability and elan of English usage are incomparable. He uses the

language of The Bible, Shakespeare, and American Constitution simultaneously to treat amazingly diametrically opposite subjects. Hence, his creature's squat on the floor for meals, wear dhoti with a coat, read the Ramayana, regards mothers as sacred, rebel against fathers, marry for love over money, and aspire for eternal life. *Narayan* writes all this without a single annotation, without any perceptible play of the foreign, but with a sense of disarming familiarity. *Narayan* represents the synthesis that is English, a language evolving through the synergy of civilizations, known and unknown; a language in continual quest...The most interesting aspect of *Narayan's* narrative art is the simplicity of language...It is through the magic of common man's language that *Narayan* succeeds in sensitizing the middle-class values."⁶

I am also impressed of *Narayan's* picture-gallery. *Narayan's* descriptive power and characterization are undoubtedly unsurpassable. He sketches characters almost every section of Malgudian lives. His characters are from beggar to businessman, from dog to underdogs, from common man to mayor, from man to machines. His characters are very lively and original. Even he adorns the profession like doctor, lawyer, teacher, postman, sweet-vendor and priest. He makes them appreciable into the eyes of readers. *Narayan's* greatness also lies in his glorification of disadvantaged and deprived people and his praise of their honesty and innocence in their poorness. Critics compare *Narayan* with *Chekhov* due to their similarities in their writings, the simplicity and the gentle beauty and humour in tragic situations.

The most amusing and beautiful aspect of *Narayan's* short stories are that they only sing about heroes and goodness but no villains. Most characters bear some special quality even face crisis in their lives but never turn out to be villain. There is some confrontation between/among the characters but they never harm to each other instead at last, they make reconciliation and solve their disputes without any tussle. The episode of Rajam, Swaminathan and Mani can be best cited. Rajam and Mani quarreled in the class, decided to

fight on the Saryu river bank but their rivalry ended with friendship.

Conclusion

Narayan ranges over every aspect of life and over every variety of characters of *Malgudi* and few can match him in the versatility of his genius in short story writings. *Narayan* is a pure artist. He observes the life around him and presents it objectively and artistically. He writes for the sake of art but not for the sake of his life in simple language of people in explicit way. So, his popularity is world-wide and immortal.

"He is that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple."⁷

Narayan, like *Jane Austin*, has achieved greatness by working on his "two inches of ivory." He deals with life of *Malgudi*, metaphor for India, and its people which he knew intimately, fulfilled his imagination and renders it accurately, vividly and realistically in his short stories. *Malgudi* is the real hero in his stories.

Narayan is master of child psychology. His portrayal of children, their hatred of Monday, their joys and sorrow, their boyish enjoyments, quarrels and friendship is superb. *Narayan* used a pure and limpid English, easy and natural in tone, moderate in structure and is beautifully adapted to communicate a different, an Indian sensibility. He uses the plain language as a vehicle of truth. As well as his stories have a vast range of picture-gallery. He pens down characters from every section of *Malgudi*. *The characters in Narayan's stories have intimacy, assurance, and honesty*. Finally *Narayan's* style has lucidity, liveliness, simplicity and naturalness.

"*Narayan* at his best [is] a consummate teller of timeless tales, a meticulous recorder of the ironies of human life, an acute observer of the possibilities of the ordinary: India's answer to *Jane Austin*."⁸

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A Short Biography of Corresponding Author:

Dr. Rakesh Yadav is a permanent assistant teacher in Garulia Mill High School(H.S). He has been the research scholar of English literature particularly in Indian writing in English. He is associated with many schools and organizations for academic betterment. He is also a motivational speaker and participates in social seminars and meetings. He believes, "Always say you are good but strive for better and hope for the best."