

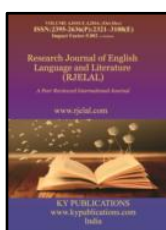


THE SHORT STORIES OF R.K. NARAYAN: A STUDY CHARACTER

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan is one of the leading contemporary novelists of Indian writing in English. He has to his credit about 150 stories and 10 novels published so far. He has written on academic, domestic and political-economic themes. He is known for his regionalism, humanism, symbolism, irony, humour and Indian ness. He blends realism and romanticism artistically. R.K. Narayan has shown a keen interest in the topology and sociology of India. Narayan has been translated into several European and Indian languages, and he has won a great deal of applause and admiration from the British and American readers, too. As recorded in his diary, an American publisher during his American tour remarked, "William Faulkner, Hemingway and Narayan are the world's three great living writers." The present study is a humble attempt at an appraisal of Narayan's short stories with special reference to 'Malgudi Days' and 'Under the Banyan Tree', sums of the pre-discussion.

Introduction

At the very outset let us remember what R.K. Narayan says about the general tendency of the fiction writers, who wrote at that critical period of the nationalist agitation. In an article on 'The Fiction Writer in India' contributed a few years ago, to the special Atlantic Monthly, Narayan remarked that during this period of nationalist agitation 'The subject matter of fiction, "became inescapably politicalthe mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul its resolution and above all the detached observation, which constitute the stuff of fiction, were forced into the background." How very true is this observation made by Narayan, when we look at the novels both Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand .Continuing further he writes that after independence, however the writer in India "hopes to express through his novels and stories the way of life, of the group of people with whose psychology and background he is most familiar, and he hopes that

this picture will not only appeal to his own circle, but also to a larger audience outside."3 Whether this is also or not in general, it certainly indicates Narayan's own interests, predilections and hopes as a writer of fiction. In the words of K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, "Narayan's is the art of resolved limitation and conscientious exploration." He would like to be a detached observer to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities He would also try to explore the inner recess of the mind, heart and soul, and to catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, and the tragic in the prosaic. R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand are the two of the greatest of Indian writers of fiction .But while Anand is a writer with a purpose, a writer who writes because he has some political or economic axe to grind, He is the rare example of a pure artist one who writes for the sake of art, and not out of any ulterior motives. That is why his popularity has been worldwide and lasting. His work has been translated

into a number of languages of the world, and his reputation as an artist has been steadily rising.⁸ He is certainly one of the most written about Indo- Anglian writers of fiction and his rating has always been high. He has been translated into several European and Indian languages, and he has won a considerable audience in Britain and in U.S.A. He has been compared with Jane Austen, with Chekov, and in U.S.A., he is considered to be the third great novelist of the world, the other two being Faulkner and Graham Greene. He is the most artistic of the Indo-Anglian novelists and Indian can justify be proud of this great son of hers. A man that within minutes could make an unforgettable impression on Greta Garbo, who wanted to see him again and again and wished that, "time would not take people to the moment of parting". must have within him something unique and extra-ordinary. The sensitive reader does not have to go outside Narayan's novels and stories to perceive this.

2. Identifying problem

In contrast to the commitments that shape the novels of Anand and Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan appears a natural story-teller, unbothered by problems of political reform, cultural conflict, or questions of national and self-identity. Narayan is of the Brahmin caste. The family came from the province of Madras to Mysore. His father attended Madras University before becoming headmaster of the government school in Mysore. Narayan himself rebelled against the Christian teachers at the Christian Missionary School in Madras. After graduating from Mysore University he found teaching unsuitable and decided against such Indian middle-class careers as the civil service and journalism. Instead he wished to become a writer, a profession which was quite hazardous at that time as there was no local or foreign market for Indian novels. Narayan's novels usually treat of those standard between tradition and contemporary life. He does not write of peasants or urban workers, rather he shows the townsman who still thinks in order ways but who inhabits the modern world. George Woodcock has perceptively said: "For if there is one characteristic which Narayan's character almost without exception shares, it is mediocrity".

The complexities of Narayan's fiction result from the neutral tone, the use of narrators who are themselves participants, and the ambiguous relationship of traditional myths and values to the events of the novel. The omnipresence of the past, never pure, always expressing itself in parodies of ideals, is the basis of Narayan's vision; he accepts his society regardless of its faults.

Narayan's characters suffer from obsessions, desires and hatred or they fall into passivity, but they never deeply examine the causes of their emotions or try to will their feelings towards an effective purpose. Narayan brilliantly portrays a representative Indian who lives from moment to moment without a thought of the future and without the ability to analyse and therefore understand his own behaviour or destiny. His portraits are comic rather than satiric. If Narayan is a sceptic, a sophisticated insider laughing at the foibles of self-deceiving Indians, he also allows for the possibility that such apparently purposeless lives may be divinely influenced.

Narayan usually writes about the semi-westernised middle class people, who hold modern ideas and practise modern styles of living but who in times of stress are emotionally tied to traditional culture. His provincial heroes often find themselves in conflict with a representative of traditional values, or, more, ironically, someone who although appearing modern is an incarnation of a Hindu devil or goddess. By treating the presence of myth, spiritualism and traditional values in the modern world, Narayan has given Indian culture a modern validity without resorting to polemics and assertion. His stories are often narrated by the main characters. As such Narayan portrays representative Indians living during the transition from old to new. Narayan seems to simply that spiritual realities may exits, although in rather unexpected and humorous forms, in modern life.

2.1 Literature Review

Narayan's writing style was simple and unpretentious with a natural element of humour about it. It focused on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbours, cousins and the like, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to the topic. Unlike his national contemporaries, he

was able to write about the intricacies of Indian society without having to modify his characteristic simplicity to conform to trends and fashions in fiction writing. He also employed the use of nuanced dialogic prose with gentle Tamil overtones based on the nature of his characters. Critics have considered Narayan to be the Indian Chekhov, due to the similarities in their writings, the simplicity and the gentle beauty and humour in tragic situations. Greene considered Narayan to be more similar to Chekhov than any Indian writer. Anthony West of *The New Yorker* considered Narayan's writings to be of the realism variety of Nikolai Gogol.

According to Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri, Narayan's short stories have the same captivating feeling as his novels, with most of them less than ten pages long, and taking about as many minutes to read. She adds that between the title sentence and the end, Narayan provides the reader something novelists struggle to achieve in hundreds more pages: a complete insight to the lives of his characters. These characteristics and abilities led Lahiri to classify him as belonging to the pantheon of short-story geniuses that include O. Henry, Frank O'Connor and Flannery O'Connor. Lahiri also compares him to Guy de Maupassant for their ability to compress the narrative without losing the story, and the common themes of middle-class life written with an unyielding and un pitying vision.

Critics have noted that Narayan's writings tend to be more descriptive and less analytical; the objective style, rooted in a detached spirit, providing for a more authentic and realistic narration. His attitude, coupled with his perception of life, provided a unique ability to fuse characters and actions, and an ability to use ordinary events to create a connection in the mind of the reader. A significant contributor to his writing style was his creation of Malgudi, a stereotypical small town, where the standard norms of superstition and tradition apply.

Narayan's writing style was often compared to that of William Faulkner since both their works brought out the humour and energy of ordinary life while displaying compassionate humanism. The similarities also extended to their juxtaposing of the demands of society against the confusions of

individuality. Although their approach to subjects was similar, their methods were different; Faulkner was rhetorical and illustrated his points with immense prose while Narayan was very simple and realistic, capturing the elements all the same.

Awards and Recognition

Mr. Narayan won numerous awards and honours for his works. He won the National Prize of the Sahitya Akademi, the Indian literary academy, for *The Guide* in 1958. He was honoured with the Padma Bhushan, a coveted Indian award, for distinguished service to literature in 1964. In 1980, R. K. Narayan was awarded the AC Benson Medal by the Royal Society of Literature. He was an honorary member of the society. He was elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982 and nominated to the Rajya Sabha — the upper house of the Parliament of India — in 1989. In addition, the University of Mysore, Delhi University and the University of Leeds conferred honorary doctorates on him. He was awarded Padma Vibhushan in 2000.

R.K. Narayan was short listed for the Nobel Prize in Literature several times but never won. Literary circles often joke that the Nobel Committee ignored his works, mistaking them instead for self-help books due to their curious titles (*The English Teacher*, *The Painter of Signs*, etc.).

His works were translated into every European language as well as Hebrew.

His admirers included Somerset Maugham, John Updike and Graham Greene, who called him the "novelist I admire most in the English language."

Legacy

Narayan's greatest achievement was making India accessible to the outside world through his literature. He is regarded as one of the three leading English language Indian fiction writers, along with Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. He gave his readers something to look forward to with Malgudi and its residents and is considered to be one of the best novelists India has ever produced. He brought small-town India to his audience in a manner that was both believable and experiential. Malgudi was not just a fictional town in India, but one teeming with characters, each with their own idiosyncrasies and attitudes, making the situation as

familiar to the reader as if it were their own backyard.

Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel of Mr Narayan's. I do not wait for another novel. I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure a stranger approaching, past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door onto yet another human existence. —Graham Greene

2.2 Major Works

Narayan's fiction inhabits the world of everyday events and common people in a fictional place called Malgudi. He incorporates traditional Hindu mythology and legends in stories of modern events. He tells stories of ordinary people who rely on Hindu principles to guide them through the ethical dilemmas and problems of modern life. Narayan's fiction avoids being overtly political or ideological. His early novels focus on the conflict between Indian and Western culture. Swami and Friends chronicles an extroverted schoolboy's rebellion against his missionary upbringing. *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) depicts an idealistic college student who attacks the bourgeois order but eventually reconciles himself to an obedient, lawful existence. In *The English Teacher* (1945); published in the United States as *Grateful to Life and Death*), an educator who endures the premature death of his wife overcomes his grief through religion and philosophy. After 1945, Narayan's fiction portrays middle-class characters who must reconcile Western ideals of financial and personal success with the everyday reality of Indian life. *Mr. Sampath* (1949; published in the United States as *The Printer of Malgudi*) chronicles a village printer's unsuccessful attempt to become a film producer. Narayan's most obviously political novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), recounts the adventures of a man whose love for a young woman leads him to attempt to sabotage Mahatma Gandhi's peace movement. *The Guide* (1958) is Narayan's most popular and accomplished novel. This work is the tale of Raju, a former convict who is mistaken for a holy man upon

his arrival in Malgudi. Implored by the villagers to avert a famine, Raju is unable to convince them that he is a fraud. Deciding to embrace the role the townspeople have thrust upon him, Raju dies during a prolonged fast and is revered as a saint. In *The Sweet-Vendor* (1967; published in the United States as *The Vendor of Sweets*), a merchant abandons his profession and his family concerns for a life of tranquillity and meditation. In *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), Narayan makes use of Indian legends and folktales to suggest that beasts may be as capable of thought and feeling as human beings. Narrated by a tiger, this novel traces the animal's spiritual development in overcoming its potential for violence. Narayan's collections of stories, *such as Gods, Demons and Others* (1965) and *The Grandmother's Tale* (1992), encompass many of the same themes as his novels in the tighter form of the short story.

2.3 Malgudi Days

R.K. Narayan's mind and art cannot be comprehended correctly and comprehensively without a thorough understanding of his Malgudi—the fictitious appellation given by him to the region, the geography and life of which, in all its variegated shades and forms, he paints in his prose narratives. All his novels, which focus on the life, particularly of the middle class, as lived in Malgudi—a fairly large district of South India—are, thus, usually termed as local colour or regional novels, and R.K. Narayan is universally considered a regional novelist in the tradition of Maria Edgeworth, Scott, Trollope, Hardy, Arnold Bennett, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner and others.

Malgudi is a fictional, semi-urban town in southern India, conjured by Narayan. He created the town in September 1930, on Vijayadashami, an auspicious day to start new efforts and thus chosen for him by his grandmother. As he mentioned in a later interview to his biographers Susan and N. Ram, in his mind, he first saw a railway station, and slowly the name Malgudi came to him. The town was created with an impeccable historical record, dating to the Ramayana days when it was noted that Lord Rama passed through; it was also said that the Buddha visited the town during his travels. While Narayan never provided strict physical constraints

for the town, he allowed it to form shape with events in the various stories, becoming a reference point for the future. Dr James M. Fennelly, a scholar of Narayan's works, created a map of Malgudi based on the fictional descriptors of the town from the many books and stories.

Malgudi evolved with the changing political landscape of India. In the 1980s, when the nationalistic fervor in India dictated the changing of British names of towns and localities and removal of British landmarks, Malgudi's mayor and city council removed the long standing statue of Frederick Lawley, one of Malgudi's early residents. However, when the Historical Societies showed proof that Lawley was strong in his support of the Indian independence movement, the council was forced to undo all their earlier actions. A good comparison to Malgudi, a place that Greene characterised as "more familiar than Battersea or Euston Road", is Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Also, like Faulkner's, when one looks at Narayan's works, the town gets a better definition through the many different novels and story.

Malgudi "is the domain of Narayan's imagination. There is no such town in any directory, almanac or atlas of the subcontinent."⁶ Narayan says, "The Goddess of learning gave me the name. You just have to take these things from your authors and artists. God may be dead today, but the Muse still exists at least to those who paint and sculpt and sing and tell stories under a stress they cannot explain. "To be a good writer anywhere" Narayan said to Ved Mehta in his interview, "You must have roots both in religion and in family. I have these things."

R.K. Narayan, thus so far as possible, keeps himself confined to Malgudi and the middle class people of this region in all his novels and short stories.

"His province was the South Indian middle class which he knew how to handle in fiction – a fiction not for an audience, six thousand miles away (as his jealous detractors writing in the regional languages accuse him) but largely for his own English knowing country men."

3.1 Under the Banyan Tree

Out of the twenty-eight stories in the following pages, the first two were written this year, while the rest are –well, I won't call them old, as the date of a story is immaterial. A writer does not germinate, grow, and decay in the manner of a piece of vegetation. The conception seems to me irrelevant; a writer's output over the years cannot be studied as bio-historical material. A writer's early stories need not be worse than his later ones, and his so-called middle period may exhibit a dull competence rather than genius. I have faith in deathlessness. A date –stamp may be necessary for a periodical, but not for a story. I came to this conclusion after trying to arrange the following stories in chronological order according to the year of publication. It didn't work, even in the few instances where I could guess the date. Then I tried to organize them according to the mood or theme of each, which again failed. Hence the only course left was to pick up a story at random, give it a number, and when all the stories were thus numbered and arranged, the collection displayed a strange but convincing pattern of affinities and contrasts.

I, for one, am prepared to assert that all theories of writing are bogus. Every writer develops his own method or lack of method and a story comes into being for some unknown reason and anyhow. The process involved cannot be stated theoretically. Once I was present at a lecture on creative writing. The lecture began with: "All writing may be divided into two groups-good writing and bad writing. Good books come out of good writing while bad writing produces failures." When touching on the subject of the short-story, the lecture said: "A short story must be short and have a story." At this point I left unobtrusively, sympathizing with the man's predicament. If asked, I cannot explain how a story comes to be written. All that I can say is that at one time I found material for my stories in the open air, market-place, and streets of Mysore. At an early stage of my life I enjoyed a lot of freedom, no one in our family minding my non-economic style of living. I read a little, also attempted to write, and went out on long walks along the tanks, parks, and avenues, or climbed the hill which looms over our city; and during some part of the day I watched also the

crowds at the market-not deliberately or consciously to pick up a subject but for the sheer pleasure of watching people. The very first story I wrote was about a one-armed beggar who stood in the middle of a narrow street in front of a coffee-house and sailed forth with up –held palm when he spotted young men emerging from the restaurant in a merry, convivial mood. I wrote my first story about him under the title “The One Armed Giant.” I remember clearly the first line-“One armed, he certainly was, but he was no more a giant than you and I.” –which sounded excellent. I don’t remember much of the story, which is lost in oblivion, originally published in *The Hindu* of Madras nearly four decades ago. Following its publication I became a regular writer for *The Hindu*. The driving force was the need to write two stories a month to survive. Most of the stories in the present volume were born out of desperation to meet the deadline on alternate Thursdays for the Sunday column.

As I mentioned, I realized that the short story is the best medium for utilizing the wealth of subjects available. A novel is a different proposition altogether, centralized as it is on a major theme, leaving out, necessarily, a great deal of the available material on the periphery. Short stories, on the other hand, can cover a wider field by presenting concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence.

A story may have its origin in a personal experience or a bit of observation or a conversation. “A Breath of Lucifer” was dedicated by me into a cassette when I had to spend ten days in bed with eyes bandaged following a cataract operation, and was attended on by a crazy male nurse. “Annamalai” is almost a documentary of a strange personality who served as a watchman in my bungalow for fifteen years; “A Horse and Two Goats” was suggested by an American friend’s visit to my house one evening in a station wagon, crammed with an enormous clay horse which he had picked up at a whispered conversation between a couple, overheard during a bus journey.

About the arrangement, as I have already mentioned, it is not chronological. The only compulsion I admitted to myself was to place “Nitya,” which is the story of a sparkling young

mind, with rebellion at heart, at the head of the collection, and at the the story of an old story-Teller who concludes his career by taking a vow of silence for the rest of his life, realizing that a Story-Teller must have the sense to know when to stop, and not wait for others to tell him.

3.2 Criticism

Though Narayan's writing have been extremely popular amongst the masses, the upper, literary classes never really warmed up to him. It has been said that his writing was pedestrian, with his simple language and stories of village life. One of his most outspoken critics has been Shashi Tharoor. In a remarkable development in Narayan studies, Sandeep Sharma of Himachal Pradesh University, in his M.Phil dissertation entitled : "The Guide and The Vendor of Sweets: A Structural Study" (2006), has researched on the oedipal as well as homosocial contents in Narayan's narrative.

4. CONCLUSION

R.K. Narayan is a major novelist of international repute. He is a novelist of popular appeal and academic interest having both bulk and quality. His fictional career mirrors the creative fecundity as well as his significant development. His career ranges 1935 to 1990, from *Swami and Friends* to *The World of Nagaraj*. In all the phases of his career he is the Novelist of Malgudi. Malgudi is a special environment of Narayan’s characters and stories. It is not possible to have a proper understanding of the development of characters and actions in his novels without a reference to it. He has portrayed Malgudi not only as a background but as a leading character in his novels he invests it with a life and show it reacting upon the lives of other characters. This much is evident from the significant part played by various streets, the Taluk office gong, Gutter, Mempi forests and caves and Sarayu in the lives of may of his leading characters drawn in the short stories. Narayan is one of India’s leading writers and one of the best known Indian writers in the west. His achievements as a writer gives him a very prominent place among the Indo-Anglian writers. The story writer, like the minstrel in European medieval tradition occupies a place of respect and popularity in Indian English Literature. Narayan so far published eight collections of stories.

1. *Malgudi Days*, 2. *Dodu and Other Stories*, 3. *Cyclone and Other Stories*, 4. *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*, 5. *Lawley Road and Other Stories*, 6 *A Horse and Two Goats*, 7. *Short Stories Old and New*, 8. *Under the Banyan Tree*. Narayan so far published his stories in daily newspapers and in foreign periodicals. He mainly depicts South Indian life. The striking features of his stories are irony, satire and humour. His irony makes him a social philosopher and holds a mirror to society and compels to see its image in it, though he is not an involved social reformist like Mulk Raj Anand and others.

The main themes of his stories are road side events, the family atmosphere, the innocent mischief of children, their innocent talk and tricks remind an adult of his childhood. Though the forte of Narayan is humour there are many stories like 'Wife's Holiday', 'Half a Rupee Worth', 'Mother and Son' which have pathos. The character and narrative technique in most of his stories is first person narrative where the character is called the 'Talkative man'. He portrays a number of characters representing various professions and occupations. His characters are drawn from urban middle class and South Indian towns. He does not identify himself with his characters nor does he evoke reader's identification. The setting in Narayan's works is vivid and as K.R. Srinivas Iyengar says; "Malgudi is the hero of Narayan's works". Narayan's plots are thin and there is nothing spectacular or distinctive about them. There are many sub-plots. But he has what E.M. Foster says: "The primitive power of keeping the reader in suspense and playing on his curiosity."³ The serious short-coming in his art is that, plot breaks mid-way.

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