

R. K. Narayan as a Writer of Comedies

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan (1906 to 2001) occupies a distinctive place by virtue of his wide range of subjects, impressive narrative technique, sparkling wit and humour and imaginative richness of all the Indian-English novelists of our day. He is one of 'the Big Three' in Indian English fiction. If Mulk Raj Anand is known for his social reformist zeal and love for the weaker sections of society and if Raja Rao distinguishes himself for his philosophical propensity, R.K. Narayan has established himself as a writer of social incongruities and individual whimsicalities in his novels.

Keywords: Comedy, Humour, Satire, Absurdities, Oddities

R.K. Narayan's outlook is primarily comic and humorous. It is so in a broad philosophic sense, which enables him to weave all the bizarre events into a beautifying vision of life, in which every small event, every small acquaintance, however insignificant and absurd it might seem, turns out to have a meaningful role in the eternal scheme of things. His vision is shaped by a strong Indian sensibility that precludes any possibility of tragedy, because man here is safely placed in a cosmic hierarchy with relation extending not only to his fellowmen but also to nature and God, not only in time and space but also beyond time and space. In the scheme of things, man is responsible to God as much as God is responsible to man. In hours of helplessness, God's grace comes to man's help, as it is symbolically affirmed in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961). In such a universe man is never driven to the "boundary situations" (Richard B. Sewall in his book *The Vision of Tragedy*, New Haven; Yale Univ. Press, 1959) so as to feel completely abandoned. The Indian world-view holds that the world and the belief in the ultimate integration. This also corroborates the views of critics like Potts and Northrop Frye with regard to the comedy. Potts believes that there is a compelling tendency in man's character which seeks integration with the life of society, to merge with others and to be a part of something greater than the individual self "The conviction various human

attachments are 'maya', and failure on the mundane level doesn't necessarily bring an awful sense of tragedy. The Malgudi comedy underlines this traditional Indian that the individual is unimportant except as a part of something wider; the impulse to mix, and to seek common ground with the rest of one's kind (L.J. Potts, Comedy, London Hutchinson Univ. Library 1948, p.18.) Potts regards this 'social sense' as forming the core of comedy. This social sense is the dominant motif in Narayan's novels. In them 'the social world and moral world are contiguous' is properly conceived in a 'moral world':

Comedy usually moves towards a happy ending and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is 'this should be', which sounds like a moral judgment. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense but social.

Its opposite is not the villainous but the absurd. (*Anatomy of Criticism*, p.167)

Characters like Sampath and Vasu are dismissed because they become absurd in the Malgudi setting. At the heart of Narayan's comedy, there is an awareness of absurdity. In his comic world, the characters are purged of their absurdities and integrated with the society. But through these absurd characters- printer, poet, Man-eater, Guide, Sweet-vendor, Narayan weaves in his Malgudi, comedy that follows the traditional comic pattern of order-disorder.

If the 'disorder' is due to the man against his society, the ultimate order in the comic framework is due to a man wedded to his society. In Narayan's fiction, man and society are closely related and the bliss that comes at the end is the outcome of this relationship. Narayan's comedies register this movement "from illusion to reality" (*Anatomy of Criticism* p.167), and in the process characters as well as the society are born into a sort of new life.

Narayan's novels set the pattern of the new comedy. The individual traverses along a path of follies and misadventures seemingly throwing the social stability into peril, and at last expiating for his blunders, returns to the fold of the society. In view of the absurd security of the Malgudi society, the apparent disasters resulting from the unbridled impulse and instincts of the comic hero only serve to build up the comic tension. The narrative implies this sense of social security, and in the context of this awareness the erratic acts and adventures of characters in Narayan's fiction arouse laughter.

In all the chaos and confusion, in all the disorderliness that we perceive in his fictional world, Narayan systematically shapes the emotional response of his readers towards the final end. He by means of clever contrivance weaves the disorderly episodes into a significant framework of moral or aesthetic awareness. The narrative shapes the readers response or attitude, for it contains as Bradbury suggests, 'a running act of persuasion' Bradbury says:

Our means of engagement with that world is through a running act of persuasion which may be stabilized as a 'tone' a rhetorical wholeness or narrative posture devoted not only to convincing us that there is here a whole world operational and worth attention but that it is taken to it----- (*Possibilities*. Page 57.)

This 'narrative posture' in Narayan implies an awareness of moral norms or social manners and because of the subtle assurance of the narrative posture, the reader is able to laugh at the eccentricities and absurdities of the characters. It is worthwhile to quote Maynard Mack in this context: "Even a rabbit, were it suddenly to materialize before us without complicity, could be a terrifying even. What makes us laugh is our secure consciousness of the magician and his hat." (*Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, p. 155.)

Narayan uses irony as a rhetorical weapon to wake his characters out of their slumber and thus to bring them back to the fold of the society. Narayan does this by an affectionate understanding of the various existential compulsions which confront his characters. It "accepts life and human nature (*Comedy*, P. 155) and in that sense it is different from satire. Satire "does not accept; it rejects and aims at destruction" (*Comedy*, p.155.) whereas Narayan's comedy aims at correction and integration, as it evokes ridicule and laughter.

There is a distinct low and mimetic bias in Narayan's comedy. It operates within a definite social framework with roots in traditional and moral values. The historical and geographical details about Malgudi and the behavioral details of its people convey a vivid impression of Malgudi's small, docile society. The reader can feel immediately its "weighty ecology" (*Possibilities*, p.59.) so that the human comedy that he witnesses here become a part of his intense, intimate experience. Narayan's comedy is rendered affectionate and intimate. In spite of bearing the satiric venom of Swift, it combines the good humour of Fielding and Wodehouse, the moral awareness of Jane Austen and the humour and pathos of Chekov.

Narayan's vision of life is essentially comic and its characteristics notes are struck in the very first novel. *Swami and Friends* presents not only an idyllic Malgudi and the fun and play of its little inhabitants like Swami, Rajam, Mani and Samuel, But also a picture of a child gradually getting groomed to the complex ways of life. The flirtations of Swami and his friends with politics and their exploitation in cricket, their innumerable adventures are rendered in vivid comic details. The innocent world of children in *Swami and Friends* stands contrast to the willed world of adults which has been more pointedly presented in Narayan's later novels. The comic vision is reflected in the children's simple ways of interaction with a world that has far serious dimensions. But Narayan's intention is to bring Swami through various stages of experience in terms of reality. *Swami and Friends* concludes with parting between friends, marking the culmination of innocence reflected in children's lines. Logically enough in the next novel, Narayan leads us along the corridors of time, to the years of youth. In the next move, Swami becomes Chandran, the adolescent youth of the college days. The first part of *The Bachelor of Art* provides vivid account of happy college life, here the character is blissfully ignorant of the various constrictions and compulsions of reality. Narayan's task is to shift his character from the place of innocence and ignorance to that of experience.

The English Teacher does not correspond to Narayan's comic design. The action is frequently confined to the domestic scene or more properly, to the husband-wife relationship. In *Swami and Friends* and *The Bachelor of Art*, opportunities exist for the interaction of various discordant forces, for the display of the incongruity which is at the heart of the comic.

From *Swami and Friends* to *The Painter of Signs* which is his latest novel, Narayan depicts life in terms of innumerable aspirations and frustrations, successes and failures, and oddities and idiosyncrasies. He does not exclude any particular age group, and within the bounds of the comic, every stage of life has got its own chalked-out place, reacting to the world outside in its own typical way.

In *Mr. Sampath*, one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces. Sampath, Srinivas, Somu, De Mello, Shanti, Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in a bizarre relationship. The characters of Narayan's novels cannot exist independently. All their pranks and idiosyncrasies fit amazingly into one another to form a total comic pattern. What John Killham says in connection with Dickens *Pickwick papers* seems true of Narayan's novels too "The important thing to note is that the characters are only made possible by the story. Jingle cannot exist independently of Dr. Slammer and the widow, of Rachael Wardle and the White Hart." (*Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, p.42.)

The comedy in Narayan's novels carries a subtle sense of pathos. Both the socio-economic conditions and questions pertaining to man's existence haunt him question such as the silent process of ageing, the temporality of our existence and the futile search for some stabilizing factor in life. For Margayya, the illusion of the marriage days no more sustains him. He had thought that, that would continue forever. What a totally false view of life one acquired on one's wedding day. (*The Financial Expert*, P.23).

And for Jagan, the charm of married life is also long since lost giving place to the forlorn days of a widower. The old miserly landlord in *Mr. Sampath*, dies with his dream of his granddaughter's marriage unrealized. Man by his puny efforts tries to create impression of permanence in a transitory existence. The dreams fall flat to the ground, and there comes the shock of recognition, the pathetic awareness of the fragility of an impermanent universe.

A comic vision embraces the multifarious facts of human life. Narayan operates in a framework of tradition and social morality which is much bigger than the individual, his ego and oddities. Sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation including the aspiring and erring individuals. Hence man's encounter with the world appears ludicrous. The comic vision always offers the consolation of reconciliation. This comedy is seen at its fullest and its best in the five novels representing the ripest in Narayan's mature art *Mr. Sampath* (1949) *The Financial Expert* (1952) *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Guide* (1958) and *The Sweet-Vendor* (1967). In *Mr. Sampath* we come across the pure milk of gaiety, in which garlanded priests, with their foreheads stamped with ash and vermilion and their backs covered with hand-spun long wraps dedicate to the gods (but as Narayan pointedly observes,

for gifts in cash and kind). Mr. Sampath's third rate studio for the production of a fifth-rate epic applying a millennial poetic ritual is a source of great fun.

Much of the comedy of *The Financial Expert*, Which includes in Margayya probably Narayan's greatest single comic creation comes from this friction of discrepancies. The clashing of contrasting orders of experience, each probing and placing the other, generates a distinct and buoyant kind of comedy. *The Financial Expert* is a simple story of success, from door-keeper to director. Margayya will do anything for money, even being religious for it. He moves from rags to riches, from a cotton to a lace dhoti, not really by financial astuteness at all but by obeying the mystifying injunction of the priest in the local temple and by performing elaborate rituals for forty days to the Goddess Lakshmi, and Goddess of Wealth.

The Guide, rehearses the comedy of Raju, ex-gaol bird, ex-tour courier, ex-theatrical agent, now fasting and dying on behalf of the peasants, who in their need for rain have forced on him the role of a saint. Raju has sainthood thrust upon him, and the irony is that he is considered a saint even when he tells the truth. The novel is also full of hilarious fun which arises from sense, as the one in which Raju and his schoolmates peer into the kitchen of the master and see him cooking, with his wife standing by and giggling. It also arises from such ironic contrasts as that presented by the Mahatma going into the inner sanctum in search of food, throwing away the empty vessels, and explaining the noise to the people by the well-known proverb: "Empty vessels make much noise", and earning their wonder and admiration for his wisdom. Comedy arising from ironic contrasts interpenetrates tragedy when the Mahatma dying by inches, is surrounded by a crowd, heartily eating and drinking and making merry. This is the way of life. Comedy, thus, fuses with tragedy, till we don't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Narayan's comedy doesn't move to any height of fantasy as in the comedies of Aristophanes, nor does it bank explicitly on satire, as Swift does in his novels. His *forte* is the commonplace the commonplace events and aspirations of people in a small South Indian town. For this Narayan uses a language that can well bear and provide ample testimony to the reality of ordinary lives. He treats not only individual's experiences, but also a collective social experience. It is not only the life- story of Swami, Chandran, Raju, Jagan and others.

Narayan's human comedy bases itself on the comic incongruity arising from man's peculiar reactions to his society. The external world thwarts the desired way of living of the individual, and in this conflict between the individual and the world an ambivalent attitude is generated in spite of his violation of moral codes of society, the individual is not wholly condemned. This incongruous relationship with the world is a fundamental fact of our existence. Narayan's genial humour, which permeates his narrative, embracing the innumerable small triumphs and failures of life from the anchor of his comic vision. A comic vision embraces the multifarious facets of human life. Narayan operates in a frame work of tradition and social morality, which is weightier than the individual, his ego and oddities..

Sooner or later, normal reality takes hold of the situation, including the aspiring and erring individuals. Hence man's encounter with the world appears comic and ludicrous. The comic vision always offers to man the consolation of reconciliation. Man's small villainies, his innumerable temptations and tragedies and the frequent abysses and heights in his life-all these form the totality of life and hence are affectionately treated by Narayan with a humane understanding.

End Note

Karl Jaspers quoted in "*The vision of Tragedy*", p. 5. Richard B.Sewall in his book *The Vision of Tragedy* (new Haven: Yale Uni. Press, 1959) explains 'boundary-situations' as "man at the limits of his sovereignty- job on the ash-heap, Oedipus in his moment of self-discovery, Lear on the health. Here with all the protective covering stripped off, the hero faces as if no man had ever faced it before the existential questions-Job's question. 'What is man?' or Lear's 'is man no more than this?' P.5.

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