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The Ironic Perspective in R.K. Narayan's Novels

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The key note of R.K. Narayan's interest is his minute observation and subtle ironic harmonious way of telling his story. Humour of Narayan is the direct course of his intellectual analysis of the contradictions in human experience tragically or comically. But this view of irony raises some issues which require explanation. The basic feature of every irony is a contrast between a reality and its appearance. We get a glimpse of the complexity of life in his novels through irony of motives, characters, situations and ideas. He is the pioneer in the tradition of ironic realism in Indo-Anglican fiction.

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In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. Narayan's Malgudi novels are so many studies in life's little ironies; he irony of the undesired and the unexpected. Life's little ironies make Narayan's novels tragic-comedies of mischance and misdirection. Irony arises from a contrast between appearance and reality, between what a character says and what he the form means, between what the character thinks he is and what he really is. Irony can take the form of situation where what is happening one thing to the person concerned but something else to those who know what is going on. It involves the idea of an outer meaning for the person concerned and an inner meaning for the privileged observer. Irony is the contrast between what appears to be and what actually is. Thus Narayan sets himself as a pioneer in the tradition of ironic realism in Indian-English fiction. In his novels, irony is not only ingrained in occasional episodes of the narrative, but is built in phenomenon in plot, character and style.

Swami and Friends is a plain story about the experiences and exploits of children, placed in the larger perspective of an adult world. Their frequent quarrels and conciliations, the burning of caps and breaking of glass pan of schools as a patriotic ritual of the Freedom Movement, the big launching of the M.C.C., their crazy efforts to create a bigger world by naively imitating a perverted one of the adults, constitute a saga of innocence and fun. As C.D. Narasimhaiah aptly remarks:

What interests Narayan in the brave talk of the youngsters who collected in street corners and echoed the high sounding youngsters words of their elders, most of whom could not have been any more effective than the school boys who employed nationalistic postures to no purpose. It is these that brought forth Narayan's comic genius in fiction.¹

The transactions of the adult world in their professed seriousness and in their hypocrisy look ridiculous before a joyous world of innocent children. *Swami and Friends* stands in ironic contrast to all other novels of Narayan that embody such adult preoccupations.

The plot of Narayan's novels follows the usual pattern of irony-order, disorder, order. From the saga of innocence in *Swami and Friends* one moves to a realm of adolescent romanticism and recklessness in *The Bachelor of Arts*. It is only in the dreams and foolishness of an adolescent where irony finds itself quite swift to operate because of the adolescent stands in a peculiar position between ignorance and innocence of the child and maturity of the adult. With the unusual topic for the college union debate, 'Historians should be slaughtered first', irony unfolds itself with a hint at the shape of things to come. The tinge of extremity, as suggested by the word 'slaughtered', is ridiculously heroic in this improbable concept and it is ironic that Chandran, a student of history and later the first Secretary of the History Association, is its prime mover. From a sentimental lover to a world renouncing *sanyasi* donning an ochre robe and then again to a devoted husband these are the successive some results of the comic hero. The counterfeit *sanyasi* which illustrates the hide-and-seek phenomenon of appearance and reality in one single role, is a favorite theme with Narayan. Traces of this phenomenon are found in the character of Jagon and in some other minor characters link the old landlord in *Mr. Sampath*. But it finds its artistic culmination in Raju's role of a saint on which the edifice of the ironic vision of the novel is built. In *Bachelor of Arts*, Chandran becomes a *sanyasi* not out of any genuine spiritual realization, but out of frustration:

He was different from the usual *sanyasi*. Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose. Renunciation may be to them a means to attain peace or may be peace itself. They are perhaps dead in time, but they do live in eternity. But Chandran's renunciation was not of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Perhaps he lacked the barest courage that was necessary for it. His renunciation was a revenge on society, circumstances, and perhaps, too, on destiny. (p.108).

Narayan, however, succeeds in building up the image of a saint during Chandran's encounter with the villagers. In the background of reality of Chandran's character, reverential response of the villagers to the *sanyasi* and the innocent interpretations of his silence create a comic situation. Narayan's ironic technique is to patch contradictory dualities in one single character-either the *sanyasi* in the role of a thief or the thief in the role of *sanyasi*.

The plot of *Mr. Sampath* is full of episodes that have little relationship with one another, as a result of which no distinct ironic treatment is noticeable. But in contrast, all the events gyrate round the character of Raju, in its various stages of development. *Mr. Sampath* is to be read either as a story about the adventures of Sampath or about Srinivavies's journey to equilibrium and wisdom; it may also be analyzed from the point of view of the relation and interaction between these two aspects. In *The Financial Expert*, the ironic treatment embraces the rise and fall of Margayya's fortunes. Margayya's faults and foolishness are treated by Narayan's ironic technique not from the standpoint of strict moral judgement, but with an affectionate understanding of life's predicament. As a consequence, the bitter bite of irony yields place to a mild disapproval or a tender stroke of the tragic-comic. In Narayan's fiction, the ironic stance leads to the attainment of wisdom that helps man to reject the illusions and unites him to his roots-either in his own self or his family or community.

The Guide a remarkable example of the especially difficult genre to which most of Narayan's work belongs, "the serious comedy."² In *The Guide* he treats with extraordinary skill the stuff of tragedy in terms of comedy "and there in consists his unique achievement in Indian fiction."³ *The Guide*, as far as the ironic perspective is concerned, achieves the supreme concentration of purpose. No episode is superfluous or unrelated to the others and all contribute to the singular theme of Raju's spiritual odyssey. Raju's life is a cast in a criss-cross of fortunes. He undergoes a process of gradual degradation from an illicit lover to a liar forging the document and then to a fake swami swindling the entire community. But this process is suddenly reversed and Raju by an extraordinary feat of suffering and sacrifice becomes the true saint redeeming his earlier life. As the swami, he narrates the story of penance to the villagers, unaware of the ironic turns whereby he will be called upon to perform the penance:

He remembered that not long ago he has spoken to them of such a penance, its value and technique. He had described partly out of traditional accounts he heard his mother narrate. (pp. 95-96).

Raju's successive rise and fall in fortune are curiously associated with the railways. So also Gaffur with his taxi who has been a witness to many a romantic moment of Raju-Rosie relationship. And now, absolutely in a different context, "Gaffur's taxi drove up and down dozen times a day." (p.214).

Of Raju's chequered career, C. D. Narasimhaiah comments thus:

Raju, a loafer getting education from old scrapes, guiding tourists, with himself illiterate falling in love with a highly educated married Indian woman without outraging Indian sentiment, taking charge of her, talking to judge and civilians, going to jail and becoming a sanyasi recognized by the villagers and even by the Government of India. Narayan has done the most incongruous things and made them credible in terms of high art."⁴

But even in his mistakes and sins Raju has a debonair appeal of personality that endears him to readers. His meetings with Rosie and Velan turn out to be decisive factors in the sensuous and spiritual chapters of his life respectively. He wins over Rosie by fanning and satisfying her instincts for dance and makes Marco a cuckold. But as William Walsh has commented, "As Rosie succeeds, as her gifts gains recognition, Raju's status changes. He is less the lover and more the manager, trainer and agent."⁵ Their public successes are ironically accompanied by the failure in their private relationships. Prof. A.N. Kaul rightly observes: "...the moments of their greatest public successors are also the moments of their greatest isolation."⁶ The denouement starts soon and a small blunder of Raju wrecks the entire understanding delicately built between them.

On the other hand, as C.D. Narasimhaih says, "Rosie is completely free from Narayan's ironic handling."⁷ Of course, the marriage interview of Rosie resembles any interview for employment, and appears to be a parody of the traditional marriage negotiations. The ironic vision in the novel emanates from the astounding transformation of personality in Raju's life.

After returning from the prison he becomes a Swami, or more pointedly speaking the mantle of swamihood falls on him. It is a pure coincidence that he, just after his release from the prison, should be discovered by Velan who has been burdened with the domestic problem of a disobedient sister. And fortunately, the girl gets cured and this confirms the villagers' belief in Raju's spiritual powers. And ones the has been built on the rocks of the innocent beliefs of villagers, Raju finds its cruel to break their illusion. In his first meeting with Velan, this has been made clear: "But he hesitated, wondering how he should say it. It looked as though he would be hurting the others deepest sentiment if he so much whispered the word 'jail'" (p.8).

When Raju undertakes the fast, he is pitted not against a vindictive husband, but against the vengeful nature. It is going against and image he has so stupidly built up himself, and those who will hasten his doom are in fact his most dedicated supporters. If this happens, in keeping with the logic of irony, Raju also has got the propensity to fulfil the expectations demanded of him and in heroic feat of his wipes out the difference between the man and the mask. This process has been presented by an ironic externalization which is –

Couched not in words but in a symbol-the crocodile which infests the river by the side of Raju's sanctuary. The crocodile, an archetypal symbol of hypocrisy provides an apt parallel for the fake saint. Appropriately enough, no one in the village seems to have actually seen the crocodile, though they all know it is there -it is a myth, which even like Raju's sainthood, becomes a reality only in death, for it is seen for the first time when the drought, which is to kill Raju, also kills it.⁸

Narayan, with a humanist's vision notes that the follies and angularities, the revolt and retreats of Malgudi folk. He finds them wallowing in their favourite illusions, wooing

their ladies, worshipping their gods, running after wealth, making films, dancing, gossiping and doing a hundred other things. It is built in ironic device in the nature of things that a universal harmony is there among all individuals and the society for whose preservation Individual instincts and ambitions often have to be trimmed. The reader feels relieved and gratified, for all's well that ends well. And this can be said to be the achievement of comic irony.

References

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