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Language and Style in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan holds a distinctive place in the contemporary Indian-English fiction writing. He is counted as one of 'the Big Three' in this realm. Mulk Raj Anand is usually remembered for his socialist leanings and Marxist attitudes and Raja Rao is acclaimed as the most vociferous exponent of Indian religious thoughts and metaphysics. R. K. Narayan is generally considered as a pure artist free from all social, political and religious botherations. The greatest contributions of Narayan to Indian English fiction is his humour. Humour is a gift that flourishes in a native tongue, but shrivels up with the touch of a foreign language. With Narayan however, it flourishes in a foreign tongue and tends to disappear in a native tongue.

Keywords- *Harmony, Spectrum, Ordinary, Distinct, Confined, Narration, Common*

Style is the embodiment of a writer's vision. It is, as David Lodge aptly asserts, "...not a decorative embellishment upon subject-matter but the very medium in which the subject is turned into art..."¹ Narayan's style embodies the Malgudi life not only in terms of reconciliation but also in the matter of representation of reality of society. Narayan's style becomes an integral part of his comic vision.

Narayan's language belongs to the everyday world of ordinary people. It is the language in which the average Malgudians dream, love and indulge in their small wars, laugh and lament. His style gives the distinct impression of a small South Indian community confined to a particular temporal and spatial setting, their manners and musings, conversation and thoughts and instinctive reactions to things. In his style, Narayan "displays his own unique signature".² In this matter he is remarkably different from other Indian-English writers, through the skillful use of language, Narayan successfully captures the rhythm of life that is peculiar to Malgudi and its people. Narayan's language is very much like the language of the newspaper and the common use an Indian makes of it for conversation. From the limited vocabulary Narayan has fashioned for himself a kind of diction of common life for

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his Indian scene- a medium at which is at once casual and convincing and used with complete confidence.

Narayan adopts the simple style of a storyteller. The narration of very ordinary events in the lives of his characters is done in an unaffected prose, in a 'Plain Prose', which 'should be not too far from talk and not too near', that F. L. Lucas considers essential for a style of "Simplicity".³ The narrative holds up a mirror to the simple, occasionally ambitious and the relaxed way of living of the Malgudians. The form and the content exist in a symbolic relationship with each other providing us with a vivid impression of life in a very plain matter-of-fact manner without ever lapsing into exaggeration or exhibiting any emotionalism. Events flow naturally, one out of another, in the same way as they would actually happen in life. During the course of narration, one hardly perceives the presence of the author. 'To quote Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, it can be said that Narayan 'shows' but does not 'tell'.⁴ Narayan could have well said what the young novelist, whom Mr. Booth quotes, "I shall not tell you anything. I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which".⁵

Whether it is a story of children as in *Swami and Friends* or a story of an old man as in *The Vendor of Sweets*, the reader is straight carried into the heart of the scene without any aid of the author or the narrator. He wins the citizenship of this world and emotionally gets involved in the events and in the characters. Any authorial interjection or any comment of the narrator would have conditioned the reader's response creating the barrier between the reader and the fictional reality. Neither Narayan nor his language which is 'plain mirror', creates this barrier. In *Mr. Sampath* we accept Srinivas the narrator because of his close proximity to us. The narrative technique wants us to see things as Srinivas sees it. One may say that the reader identifies himself with Srinivas as much as Narayan does it with the latter, that "The author is present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner, the badge of reliability".⁶ Through Srinivas, the human comedy is brought home to the reader. This is made possible by the occasional comments and the philosophical reflections of Srinivas. This technique has sometimes the danger of sacrificing the dramatic tension. Same *The Man- Eater of Malgudi*, where Natraj could well have been the narrator because of his proximity to the common reader, no other novel could have justifiably employed any of its characters as narrator. In *The Guide*, Narayan makes an innovation in his narrative technique. Through the autobiographical narration of Raju's life from his innocent childhood to the crucial turning-point, we are persuaded to see the joys of his early days, the adventure of his adolescence through his eyes so that his willing martyrdom can be understood in the perspective of the spiritual journey of his life. Through the very treatment of plot and particularly through his delicate irony, Narayan subtly communicates his point of

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view. Mr. Booth's words may well be applied to Narayan, Everything he shows will serve to tell; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one.⁷

Narayan's style is so uniformly simple that the most ludicrous as well as the most serious events are described in the same vein. The language is neither unduly burdened nor any symbols and images employed to add to the poignancy of any particular situation. To capture the throb of life not only in the social context of Malgudi, but also in the deeper recesses of the individual, Narayan uses simple diction and lucid style by means of which one can at once see the surface and the depths beneath. As P. S. Sundaram puts it, "A great deal of his effect depends precisely on the unhurried pace, the even tone, the words which seem to be 'just their declared selves' and yet contain a world irony."⁸

Narayan's contemporary novelists convey the specific feel of the life that depict through various experiments and innovations. Mulk Raj Anand, for example, largely depends upon literal translation of native phrases, proverbs and slangs, direct presentation of Hindi words like 'angrez log' 'thappar' etc. to achieve an effect of realism, generally pertaining to proletarian life. Raja Rao experiments with sentence-structure in order to create the particular rhythm. In contrast to Anand and Raja Rao, whose styles are conspicuous by their easily discernible artifice, Narayan uses a simple style. The irony in his works is subtly fused into this simplicity to form a total vision of life. This becomes possible because "his irony is nothing but an honest recording of facts, without any colouring of conventional sentiment".⁹ The deep sense of humour which pervades all his novels springs from the recognition that are misfortunes are the consequences of our silly ideas and ambitions and can be accepted not with despair, but as a positive influence on our characters. The discomfiture of the individual is mainly of his own doing, resulting from his absurd aspirations in a limited world. Thus "humour may be defined as the sense within us which sets up a kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the expression of that sense in art".¹⁰ Narayan's comic vision not only deals with the joyous sides of life, but also with its serious and painful aspects. In spite of occasional sorrows and sufferings in his novels, Narayan's world does not present any picture of gloom and despair, as the comic vision diffuses the assured warmth of life.

Narayan's prose –style is of a home-grown variety. For him "English is an absolutely swadeshi language".¹¹ Narayan's medium, "a Bharat brand of English", is eminently suited to Indian conditions. He believes that English has had for a long time "a comparatively confined existence in our country chiefly in the halls of learning, justice or administration. Narayan's language is so simple, so bare and bald that one does not feel it to be a foreign language, equipped as it is with its limited vocabulary and its limited patterns of sentences, mostly having subject+ Verb+ object sequence- the kind of language our college students would love to emulate. Narayan's style is impressive when fused with humour, but on other occasions it verges on banality, becomes unentertaining, monotonous, even tiring. P.S. Sundaram, who otherwise enological of Narayan, concedes that the novelist could have done better by

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avoiding “a certain staleness of language, lifelessness and clichés.”¹² Consider, for example the use of ‘I’ in *The Guide*:

I was losing a great deal of my mental relaxation. I was obsessed with thoughts of Rosie. I reveled in memories of the hours I spent with her last or in anticipation of what I’d be doing next. I have several problems to contend with. Her husband was the least of them. He was a good man, completely preoccupied, probably a man with an abnormal capacity for trust. But I was becoming nervous and sensitive and full of anxieties in various ways. Suppose, suppose-soppose? I myself could not specify. I was becoming fear-ridden. I could not even sort out my worries properly. I was in jumble. I was suddenly seized with fear, sometimes with a feeling that I did not look well enough for my sweetheart. Sometimes I felt I was in rags.¹³

Narayan’s style: encompasses many diverse facets of life and experience, which are all subject to one Malgudi ethos that is constant or eternal in spite of the seeming changes. His canvass is limited in a sense that he treats a small group of people in a small geographical setting; but at the same time he gives details of the innumerable equation in which they exist with one another and with the society.

Prof. V. K. Kantak compares Narayan’s prose style to a one-stringed instrument. He also underlines Narayan’s lack of interest “in exploring the fuller, deeper possibilities of the language”.¹⁴ Narayan’s style is indeed like an old, a rickety, wooden spinning wheel squeaking and rattling noisily at a monotonous pace. Narayan’s English is extremely limited. His vocabulary has always a very modest range. Word or phrase rarely glints with compression or suggested meanings. They are just their own declared selves. The sentence has a certain structural monotony. It is always the same subject-predicate-object complement pattern with an occasional appendage of phrase or clause or with an occasional inversion. He has certainly none of the graces nor the dialectic power of the language spoken by native speakers of English. Nor do we discern anything like the influence of an intimate habitual contact with English literature as is the case with those writers who have had a dominant academic background. In that respect, and for lack of poetic element, his language is extremely impoverished and limited.

Indeed, Narayan lacks a comprehensive vision, a right perspective or a philosophy of life embracing the whole universe. He lives in the moment and thinks for the moment. His jokes and witty remarks tickle the reader, create a momentary ripple and are forgotten. So are the episodes, incidents in his novels. In *The Guide*, Narayan has introduced sensational objects and incidents often found in any popular Indian movie: Cobra dance, elephants and tigers love triangle, seduction, court scenes etc. The hero, too, is a typical *bahurupia*-multi-co-loved, ever changing, chameleon like personality which tickles and pleases the common masses but baffles, even irritates the serious fiction-reading public and the literary critic. On

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such occasions, Narayan appears like a garland-maker who keeps the needle and the thread ready to weave with it any kind of flowers that comic-handy rose, dahlia not excluding cauliflower and cabbage for comic purposes but without design or pattern, and without discarding poorer variety even when the better ones happen to be available in abundance at a later stage.

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