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S. Gunasekaran, Ph.D. Candidate

The Comic Vision in the Stories and Sketches of R. K. Narayan

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R. K. Narayan and Short Story

Narayan has a clear preference for the short story as an asset form. He enjoys writing a short story because, unlike the novel, it does not require a long consistent effort or a “minutely worked out detail. It can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of a detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax” (*Malgudi Days*, 7).

In Narayan’s opinion, the Indian scene provides a limitless wealth of material to a short story writer. All the rich experience cannot be utilized in novels alone since they are centralized “on a major theme, leaving out, necessarily, a great deal of available material on the periphery”. The short story, he declares, can cover a wider field by presenting “concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence” (*Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, vii).

Humour in Narayan’s Short Stories

Narayan, apart from producing humour through words, ideas, situation and character in the novels, he also equally produces humour through words, ideas, situation and character in the short stories.

Narayan’s first collection of short stories, *Malgudi Days* (1941) contains several stories of comic and farcical situation. According to Prof. Abidi, “*Malgudi Days* marks a significant beginning in the creative career of R.K.Narayan, which later yielded a rich and satisfying crop in the field of short stories” (28).

Narayan creates the character of the Talkative Man who appears as a brilliant comic narrator in many short stories in later collections. The reportorial quality is also very strong in *Malgudi Days* and the stories have a strong popular appeal.

Irony, Satire and Other Effects

“Man-Hunt” is a funny story based on an ironic situation. Sankar, an unemployed youth, comes across an advertisement about a missing boy. Tempted by the reward of fifty rupees, he hunts out the boy, but his name and age are different. Sankar however takes the boy to his house, and is surprised to learn from the boy’s father that the photo given in the paper was a wrong one. The boy he has brought is the elder brother of the missing boy and so he does not get the reward. The humour here rests on the comedy of error which is revealed towards the end of the story.

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“The White Flower” is a mild satire on the Hindu system of marriage, according to which the union of two hearts depends upon the matching of horoscopes or on the wishes of other people. Krishna, a student of B.A., falls in love with a girl. But their horoscopes do not match. Krishna’s father has no faith in horoscopes, but the girl’s father clings on to tradition. The matter is therefore referred to the priest of the temple who suggests that the decision be left to God. They gather in the temple and place two flowers, a red and a white one, before God. A child is to pick one of the two flowers. The red flower is for ‘no’ and the white one for ‘yes’. The child picks the red flower and all accept this decision of God. Krishna is stunned and “wished that he had it in his power to bleach all the flowers in the world” (*Malgudi Days*, 94).

The story is a good example of Narayan’s mingling of humour and pathos. There is grim irony in the title, as the red flower is not what Krishna wanted. The story has a strong autobiographical content. The horoscopes of Narayan and his wife did not match, and she died within four years of marriage. Narayan deals with this subject elaborately in his novel *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and also in the story “The Seventh House” in *A Horse and Two Goats* (1970).

Humour Based on the Observation of People

Dodu and Other Stories (1943) is Narayan’s second collection of stories and it presents Narayan’s keen and critical observation of people. Like the previous collection it also has the dominant setting of Malgudi. Ironic situations play an important part in stories like “Gandhi’s Appeal”, “Blessings of Railway”, “Engine Trouble”, and “The image”.

In “Gandhi’s Appeal”, Narayan describes how a lawyer and his wife, Padma, are led to do something which they have taken every care to avoid. Both husband and wife decide to attend Mahatma Gandhi’s meeting without money and ornaments for they are afraid of his appeal for funds.

Many ladies go stripped of all their jewellery and ornaments. Padma, however, feels ashamed of going out of her house without any ornaments for she considers it to be very inauspicious. She puts on the slenderest bangles and resolves to keep them covered with the end of her saree. When, however, the call for funds comes from Gandhiji, she is unable to resist. She donates her gold bangles. On returning to her house she is afraid of revealing the loss to her husband who has warned her earlier. When she discloses her mistake, she learns that her husband too has committed a similar mistake for he has drifted towards the meeting unwillingly with fifty rupees in his pocket and dropped them into Gandhiji’s charity box.

The story gives a very impressive account of Gandhiji’s wide popularity and irresistible charm: “There was a rush on to the platform. Articles and money were brought to Gandhi

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at great speed. He attracted them like a central force. Men, women and children scrambled in confusion to approach Gandhi and offer him something” (64).

In “Blessings of Railway”, a clever father, Sambasivan, plans to show his beautiful daughter to a promising young man in a railway compartment. This young man has earlier refused interviews to all the parents who have approached him with a proposal for their daughters’ hands. Sambasivan’s trick works for the young man is attracted towards his beautiful daughter and becomes interested in his marriage with her.

Ironic Complications

A series of ironic complications enhance the comic effect in the short story “Engine Trouble” in *Dodu and Other Stories* (1943). The story is narrated by the Talkative Man who wins a road engine in a lottery, but could not move it out of the Municipal ground. No buyer comes forward and he has to pay the rent for the place his engine occupies. No driver can be found and the transportation of the engine to some other place becomes an urgent problem.

At last with the help of the temple elephant and fifty hired men and an old friend who knows a little bit of driving, he makes an attempt to move it out. But the situation worsens when the engine collides against the wall of a neighbour’s house and demolishes it.

It was a fine sight; the temple elephant yoked to the engine by means of stout ropes, with fifty determined men pushing it from behind, and my friend Joseph sitting in the driving seat. A huge crowd stood around and watched in great glee. The engine began to move. It seemed to me the greatest moment in my life. When it came out of the Gymkhana and reached the road it began to behave in a strange manner. Instead of going straight down the road it showed a tendency to wobble and move zig-zag. The elephant dragged it one way, Joseph turned the wheel for all he was worth without any idea of where he was going, and fifty men behind it clung to it in every possible manner and pushed it just where they liked. As a result of all this confused dragging the engine ran straight into the opposite compound wall and reduced a good length of it to powder. At this the crowd let out a joyous yell. The elephant disliking the behaviour of the crowd, trumpeted loudly, strained and snapped its ropes and kicked down a further length of the wall. The fifty men fled in panic, the crowd created a pandemonium. Someone slapped me in the face-it was the owner of the compound wall. The police came on the scene and marched me off. (39-40).

The Talkative Man is imprisoned for causing public inconvenience. When he was released, he had to face a series of consequences like paying for the damages, paying for

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the hired men, paying for medicines for the injured knee of the elephant, and finally move the engine out of its present station.

The narrator desperately tries every possible means. But a natural calamity averts further trouble and saves him. An earthquake drives the unwanted engine into an unused well in the compound of the same neighbour who now becomes very happy because his well has been plugged and he agrees to withdraw the case against the narrator. It is one of the most humorous stories in this collection.

Vivid Descriptions

The following description of a procession trying to drag the road engine out of the Gymkhana Grounds, is significant both for its vividness and humour:

“The Image” tells the story of a sculptor named Jakanachari who has built famous temples at Belur, Halebid and Hoysala during the 12th century. He prides himself to be an expert selector of stones for the images. One day while he was busy working on an image, a youngman comes there. He points out that the stone has a flaw in it. Jakanachari is enraged and challenges the young man to prove the veracity of his statement. The young man is none other than Jakanachari’s long lost son and he proves his statement. Jakanachari accepts defeat and cuts off his arm and gives up his beloved art. But he is happy that he got back his son at last.

Precious Find that is Worthless

“The Roman Image” in *Cyclone and other stories* (1943) gives a very humorous account of a funny situation. The Talkative Man who narrates the story worked as an assistant to an archeologist who was interested in old monuments and statues. One day they pick up a stone image out of a river bed, and mistake it for a Roman statue which they think will be a clue to India’s close relations with the ancient Roman Empire. After a lot of intense ‘research’ they worked on a monograph covering over a thousand pages. All the while, the whole world is waiting for its publication. But their hopes of fame and popularity were shattered when the assistant, in a casual conversation with a man of the locality learns that the image has nothing to do with Rome and that their precious find was one of the mutilated statues of a neighbouring temple situated on the bank of the river. The man vouchsafed that he himself had once commissioned it for the temple.

In Search of Parrots

In “A Parrot Story”, Ramani whose talents as a poet remain unrecognized because editors and publishers stand between him and his public, decides to improve his fortunes by starting the parrot business. He is attracted towards this new venture by an advertisement in a local newspaper for a parrot trained to repeat the holy names of gods and slokas. The advertiser offers to pay up to rupees one hundred if the parrot comes up to his

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expectation. Ramani's fertile mind immediately begins to work upon the details of the parrot business. He realizes that parrots can serve a very useful purpose in the modern economy.

Besides, training parrots for religious prayers, he can train them for quoting prices in business houses or reeling off the menu in coffee hotels and thus save the energy of shop assistants. If he manages to sell even one such trained parrot to customers like the generous advertiser, his income of rupees one hundred per month is ensured. He, therefore, soon contacts the advertiser, Mr. Madusudhan, and books his order for a religious parrot. As he starts his search for parrots, he luckily comes across a stranger, Kandan, who promises to supply him on a meager sum of Rs.15/- a parrot capable of fulfilling the demands of Ramani's client. After a few days he supplies him a healthy parrot but forbids him not to coax it to utter holy sounds till he reaches his customer and gives it some rest and red chilies to eat. Delighted with the prospect of soon earning a heavy amount, Ramani takes it to Madhusudhan. When the bird is, however, coaxed to utter something, it shouts commands for the troop drill. Disappointed Ramani soon runs away from there leaving the cage behind. After two days, much to his consternation, he discovers from a local advertisement that the parrot of a military officer is stolen by some one. The advertiser offers a reward to the finder. Though cheated by Kandan, Ramani heaves a sigh of relief that he has escaped being hauled up for theft. The story is marked by a subtle irony characteristic of Narayan as a writer.

Turning Around Ironic Situations

An *Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*, (1947) Narayan's fourth collection, contains stories which turn around ironic situations. "The Watchman" and "A Snake in the Grass" are based on subtle ironic situations. The former points out that unable to dissuade a girl from attempting to drown herself in a river, the watchman leaves her to her fate and goes away. A few years later he is surprised to find the same girl visiting the spot with her husband and children.

In "A Snake in the Grass" a clever servant befools his mistress and her sons by pretending before them that he has succeeded in tracing cobra and catching it in a pot. A little later, the members of the family are surprised to see a cobra crawling under the gate of their house and disappearing along a drain. The story contains a very amusing description of the hectic search made for tracing the cobra which has been seen by a beggar entering the compound of the bungalow.

Contemporary Situations as Background for Stories

Narayan always chooses a contemporary situation which affects the common man's routine and brings out even the simplest details which provide amusement. He is always at his best when his genial humour gives way to a mild but effective satire. "Lawley

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Road”, which forms the title piece of *Lawley Road and Other Stories* (1956), is a perfect piece of such excellence.

The municipal council of Malgudi, in a spurt of patriotism on the wake of independence, decides to “nationalize” the names of all streets and parks with colonial association. Lawley extension was changed to “Gandhi Nagar” and the statue of the tyrant Sir Frederick Lawley was removed. It was acquired by a man who hoped to sell it for a big profit. The statue causes endless troubles to the unfortunate man. With great difficulty and heavy expense he carts the huge statue to his house.

Meanwhile the municipal council is informed that Sir Lawley was a benefactor and not a tyrant, and the Government demands that the statue be reinstated. The chairman of the municipality is forced to buy back the statue. But then he could not waste public money by carting it back to its original place. The narrator at last suggests that his house where the statue now lies be purchased and turned into a Museum. The chairman agrees and the statue was erected there itself and the place converted into a park. The council resolves that Kabir Lane shall be changed to Lawley Road.

The story brings out Narayan’s reportorial quality, locality of language, artistic detachment and establishment of a concrete mood. The element of satire is dominant in his portrayal of the Municipal chairman. The spurt of patriotism is also satirically portrayed.

Animals Add to Lasting Humour

“Flavour of Coconut” and “At the Portal” are stories about animals. “Flavour of Coconut” is the more interesting of these stories. It gives a funny description of the hunt and trial of a little mouse who has been guilty of rattling the vessels, ravaging the food-stuffs, puncturing the voile sarees and biting the younger members of the household in their soles. Narayan’s mock description of the trial of the little mouse is very amusing and interesting. How delightful is the following description of the mouse as it has been taken a prisoner:

It was a formidable gathering of accusers. People seemed only too ready to pick up and throw just another pebble at one who was already down. The walls of the prison were hemming him in, the bars seemed to be fixed molten lead. This was both a dock and a prison. The trial was summary, because the times were dangerous. (20)

The Judge and the Crime

Equally entertaining is the following description of the sternness with which the head of the family in his capacity as a judge, views the crime of the accused:

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They spoke of capital punishment as easily as if they were asking someone to go out of the room. Death sentence seemed to be a fair certainty. It could not be otherwise. The charges were serious. The prisoner was an anti-social element. His movements were secretive. He came out only in the dark. He was given to looting and dacoity; sabotage and destruction. On the whole, a horrible record. The junior-most member of the assembly suddenly felt that he ought to put in a word for mitigation. He ventured to suggest transportation for life instead of capital punishment. The judge sneered, 'Transportation'. Why? The defence blinked. The judge added, 'so that he may carry on his depredations elsewhere, suppose!' people were silenced by the grimness of his Lordship's manner. He demanded further, 'Even. If he is taken away, how are you to make sure that he won't sneak back?' (21)

Insight into Human Psychology

The writer provides a keen insight into human psychology through the reactions of different members of the family on the arrest of the mouse. Ramu the youngest son shows his sympathy for the mouse, even though it has trimmed the edges of his arithmetic book. He tells his sister "You probably tore your saree over a nail and now blame everything on that poor rat. People blame that rat for every thing that happens in this house nowadays. Who knows, there is perhaps no rat at all."(22-23) is quite convincing. How touching and realistic is his reaction when the accused is being taken for execution:

The little boy scrambled to his feet when he heard foot-steps in the corridor. He knew that the servant was coming to take the trap to the execution yard, and wondered for a second whether he should not run away from this said spectacle, but he was overcome with a morbid curiosity, and followed the servant mutely as the rat-trap was picked up and taken out. (24)

Mistaken Identity and Misdemeanors

"Trail of the Green Blazer" describes how Raju, a pickpocket, who has successfully removed a purse from the pocket of a man putting on the green blazer, is moved by the presence of balloons lying in the purse. He thinks about the disappointment of the small child for whom the balloons are purchased and decides to restore the purse to its owner. As he is trying to put the purse back in the pocket of the green blazer, he is caught and arrested. The sympathy for children lands the poor labourer, Kali, also in trouble. In the story, "Sweets for Angels", moved by his deep love for children, Kali buys sweets for them out of his earnings. But as he is distributing these sweets among children he is mistaken for a kidnapper of children and beaten ruthlessly by people.

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In “Wife’s Holiday” we are shown the critical situation in which Kannan finds himself when his wife returns from her father’s house unexpectedly. The story gives a touching description of the remorse felt by Kannan at emptying his son’s money box and spending it on himself.

“Four Rupees” is more humorous than the previous stories. It describes the ironical situation in which Ranga, a jobless labourer, is caught when he unwittingly agrees to pull out a bucket from a deep well. Having never done the job before, he tries to wriggle out of his commitment, but in vain. The story provides a very amusing description of Ranga’s fears as he is made to slip down the well. Luckily his adventure proves successful and he earns four rupees as his wages. In “The Antidote”, we are told of the mental agony experienced by an actor who is in the course of his acting is asked to die the very day the astrologers have predicted his accidental expiry. While agreeing to play the ominous role, he winks behind the crowd to assure himself that he is not dead.

“Like the Sun” is one of the most humorous stories in this collection. It describes the trials and tribulations of Sekhar, a teacher who having realised “that morning to night, the essence of human relationship consisted in tempering truth so that it might not shock” (Lawley Road, 137), decides to practice absolute truth on a certain day. Before the day is over he finds that he has already annoyed two important persons with whom he is most concerned –his wife and his head master. Perplexed by the disheartening situation, he remarks: “Two casualties for today. If I practice it for a week, I don’t think I shall have a single left” (140). He realizes the dangers of practicing truth and gives it up.

“Salt and Sawdust” is a very interesting story and the title piece of the collection *Salt and Sawdust* (1993). In his foreword to the book Narayan says that the story originated from an anecdote narrated by a journalist from Holland. A Dutch lady apparently wrote a laborious, bulky novel and sent it to her publisher, who after glancing through it, suggested as a joke that she would do well to pass her time writing a cookery book. She took him at his word and produced one in the course of time. It became a best-seller and continues in the rank for forty years now.

But the poor wife cannot tell the difference between salt and sawdust when it comes to cooking and leaves her husband with no option but to cook himself. Narayan has given the story his inimitable Malgudi setting where Swami and Veena, a childless couple, enact the whole drama of *Salt and Sawdust*. The wife is all the time engaged in writing a novel while the husband does all the cooking. Of course Swami contributes his share of ten pages to the novel when he writes about the various dishes served during the grand feast after the wedding of the hero and the heroine. When the novel goes to the publisher, he offers to publish that portion which describes the feast as the first book with a little more elaboration and adding up a few more recipes. The novel part can be published later. The first book becomes an instant success and a best seller and keeps the press busy. Veena meanwhile forbids her husband from entering the kitchen and engages a master cook. The story ends with Veena always keeping alive her hopes of seeing her

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novel in print and Swami never losing his hope that someday he would be allowed to cook.

Situation and Character

“An Astrologer’s Day” in *Cyclone and Other Stories* (1943) is a good example of how Narayan combines situation and character to produce the best humorous effect. This story also forms the title piece of the collection published in 1947. The story is “built around the principle of simple irony of circumstance, leading to the shock of discovery or surprise or reversal at the end” (Naik, 93).

A fake astrologer meets a man named Guru Nayak with whom he had quarreled once in his village and attempted to kill him. Fearing that Guru Nayak is dead, he ran away from his village and settled in the present place as an astrologer. But Guru Nayak survived and is in search of his enemy to take revenge. The man, who was feared killed, now appears as an aggressive customer who challenges the astrologer to tell his future. The astrologer recognizes him, while the other does not. When he persisted, the astrologer tells him the gruesome incident in which the astrologer himself was the protagonist. Guru Nayak is surprised to hear his own name uttered by the astrologer who also tells that the man who Guru Nayak is in search of, is now dead, crushed under a lorry and so there is no need of continuing the search. He advises Guru Nayak to go back at once for, “I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home” (6).

Guru Nayak meets the man he has been looking for and yet fails to recognize him. As for the astrologer, the shock of discovery produces humour. He feels relieved too that his hands are free from the guilt of blood, a feeling that has been nagging him for several years.

The astrologer is one of the most memorable characters of Narayan. He has a shrewd mind and “a working analysis of mankind’s troubles... within five minutes he understood what was wrong”, and “never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices”(3). Moreover the ironic setting in which he transacts business, “in semi-darkness, trying to throw light on the future of others while being in dark about his own”, is equally humorous. The description of the busy street, ill-lit by shop lights and the flare of lamps from street vendors is very beautiful: “It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life” (2).

The above story is a good example where not only the situation and character blend together, but there is also “that elusive element called atmosphere”. Narayan has succeeded in creating this “humorous atmosphere” in some of his short stories and novels. The story is also a good example of Narayan’s well-made stories in which the opening establishes “an instant contact between reader and writer”, and the ending also

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shows “a strong influence of O.Henry’s celebrated technique of the trick finale” (Naik ,100).

This brief analysis of Narayan’s short stories from his collections, gives one ample evidence of his greatness as a leading Indian short-story writer in English. They are full of rich and sparkling entertainment and in them gaiety, fun, satire, amusement, pathos and excitement follow each other in endless variety. It is very seldom that Narayan attempts to surprise his readers with a trick-ending or an involved plot. For the most part he rather prefers to get his effects by revealing new aspects and experiences of life in seemingly common place situations and unsuspected shades of character in ordinary individuals. In a quiet and incisive manner he relates the trivial happenings of everyday life, observes the foibles of his own small South Indian world of Malgudi and records them with wit and irony but never malice. He sets his characters before our eyes with the utmost economy of words, without any interposing description or moralizing. He treats them in such a convincing manner that the readers accept their action as inevitable. He understands his people so completely that every gesture they make is in their character and adds to our knowledge of them.

Narayan’s 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. He also paints life as it is, without caring for any immediate or remote aims. His receptivity and his capacity for compassion are enormous. Like a detached artist he never identifies himself with his characters, never loses his sympathy for them. His world is always irradiated by an enchanting humour. Even at the places where futility appears in his stories, it is not conceived as a malady resulting from any particular age and likely to be over after the change in times. In this respect Narayan’s stories are more universal in nature than others.

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