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**Narrative Technique, Language and Style in
R. K. Narayan's Works**

S. Gunasekaran, Ph.D.

The Nature of Narrative Technique

Narrative technique is one of the most important aspects of imaginative literature. According to Angus Ross a discussion of the nature of the narrative and the mode of narration can carry us to the heart of the 'meaning' of a work of fiction (qtd. Ramana 156). The author may sometimes speak in his 'own voice' or employ character or characters or narrator agents to tell the story. "The nature of the narrator—his reliability, position in relation to story... the point of view, focalization, tone and language—are very important choices for author in shaping a narrative and its meaning" (Ramana 117). The present paper analyses the narrative technique, language and style of Narayan for a better understanding of his art and its meaning.

The Humorous Tone

Narayan is a born story teller. He has no interest in complex socio-economic issues or questions of technique or form. For him only the story matters. He narrates the story both at the superficial level where the locale is dominating, and at the deeper level where general truths are incorporated in artistic terms. He tells the story with the ease of a raconteur. The very tone of his narration gives rise to humour. His narrative strategy is simple and traditional.

P.S.Ramana observes: “His narrators do not display any great variety. In terms of the implied values and attitudes, the narrator is always reliable and bears a very strong imprint of the author. He tends to focus on the comic and the ironic only” (125).

Third Person Narrative

Most of the short stories are third person narratives where the vision of the unobtrusive narrator is broadly limited to one character or incident only. He often gives the ‘inside views’ of the characters and speaks from a slightly higher moral position. But there is no attempt at moralizing. He remains detached and observes the characters in an uninvolved and amused manner. The narrative stance is not consciously planned by the author, but is rather a natural sequence of the personal and ideological preferences of the author (Ramana 134).

Reportorial Quality

One of the dominant features of Narayan’s short stories is the reportorial quality that one finds in them. Before beginning his literary career, Narayan had worked as a news reporter to *The Justice* and has been a regular contributor of his stories to the popular newspaper *The Hindu*. Thereafter some of his stories are of the magazine—type having a kind of newspaper origin.

Colorful Vignettes

Moreover they have either simple plots or are at least colourful vignettes and sketches. In some of the stories Narayan makes use of the Talkative Man as his objective reporter whose narration from his personal experience imparts verisimilitude and credibility to the stories.

In all these stories, the first person oral narration is reported by a third person narrator who begins with the cryptic introduction: “The Talkative Man said”. In A Night of the Cyclone, the third person narrator comes back at the end of the story to finish it.

In The Tiger’s Claw and The Snake Song the introductory narration by third person is slightly longer and he finishes the story after the reminiscent narration of the talkative man has ended. Narayan makes use of first person passive participant narrators in stories like Uncle, Annamalai and A Breath of Lucifer, while in stories like The Second Opinion, At The Portal and An Accident the first person passive participant narrators are just observers of action. But the change in the person of the narrator does not alter the narrative structure of the story in any significant way. “All the first person narrators of Narayan are as reliable as the third person narrators” (Ramana 133).

Ancient Oral Tradition

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Narayan's Talkative Man can be said to be a reincarnation of the ancient Indian oral story-teller. He has an easy flow of words, like the traditional story—teller, and speaks at a basic level and needs an essential receptivity from his audience. In his novel Talkative Man, Narayan gives a brief account of him:

They call me Talkative Man. Some affectionately shorten it to TM: I have earned this title. I suppose, because I cannot contain myself. My impulse to share an experience with others is irresistible, even if they sneer at my back. I don't care. I'd choke if I didn't talk, perhaps like Sage Narada of our epics, who for all his brilliance and accomplishments carried a curse on his back that unless he spread a gossip a day, his skull would burst. (1)

Straight Forward Narrations

All the novels of Narayan, except The Guide are straight forward narrations. "Uncomplicated by chronological disjointedness or multipoint of view"(Uma Parameswaran 52). Narayan employs first person narrators in novels like The English Teacher, The Man-Eater of Malgudi, Talkative Man and A Tiger for Malgudi while he makes use of third person narrative in all the other novels except The Guide, where both the first and the third person narratives are employed.

In The English Teacher the protagonist Krishnan is the narrator. The choice of the first person narrator adds immediacy and conviction to the narration, and the reader becomes emotionally involved and tends to accept the experiences of the protagonist.

In Mr.Sampath and The Man-Eater of Malgudi, Srinivas and Natraj respectively are Narayan's narrator agents who help the reader to understand the main characters through their comments and to an existent influence the course of events.

In The Bachelor of Arts, with in the third person narrative, the reader comes upon the interior monologue in which Chandran the hero argues with himself. In Grand Mother's Tale Narayan himself is in the role of the Talkative Man. It is the story of his own great-grand mother, told by his grandmother whom he fondly calls Ammani.

"A Horse and Two Goats", the title story of the collection published in 1970, illustrates how the manipulation of narrative strategy can mould almost any material into an easy-paced humorous narrative, typical of Narayan. "The story is a fine illustration of the way narrative technique can impose meanings upon a story which appear totally alien when the events are studied in an abstract form" (Ramana 126). The first sentence itself sets the typical easy-paced and relaxed tone of the narratives:

Rural Scenario

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Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India, in which the majority of Indians five hundred million live, flourish, and die, Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot, the map being meant more for the revenue official out to; collect tax than for the guidance of the motorist, who in any case could not hope to reach it since it sprawled far from the highway at the end of a rough track furrowed up by iron-hooped wheels of bullock-carts. (5).

Attitudes toward Villages and Villagers

The narratorial rhetoric of the above lines conditions the attitude of the readers towards the village and an ordinary villager. Narayan's detached, humourous and ironic tone established the ordinariness and the insignificance of the village. The anticipation raised about the motorist wanting to reach Kritam is ironically dashed as the reader learns about the state of the link road. In the second sentence Narayan describes the village and explains the meaning of the word 'Kritam' which in Tamil means 'coronet' or 'crown' on the brow of the sub continent (5).

A detailed analysis of the story shows that

Narayan manipulates various narratorial devices like focalization, narrative distance, variations in the degree of involvement and position of the narrator in relation to the story, narratorial commentary, discursive and digressive mode of narration, verbal humour and irony to evoke such a pattern of signification that the story is read basically as presentation of the comedy of harmless misunderstanding. (Ramana 127).

An Omniscient Narrator

The Financial Expert has an omniscient narrator, but most of the novel is focalized through Margayya. Through authorial comments Narayan offers information about Murgayya's life before the narrative began, or in periods within the story time, but not covered by the novel.

Moreover we see Margayya from the perspective of his clients, neighbours and relatives. Quite often the narrative takes the form of an interior monologue or stream of consciousness technique. The scene in which Margayya returns home after his first encounter with Dr. Pal is a good example in which Margayya thinks about the strange man, his book, the priest's injunction and his own future. The past, the present and the future are very skillfully blended:

This man wanted to put in pictures—what a wicked fellow. It'd be most awkward... Why was Dr. Pal interested in the subject? Must be an awful

rake...Some of the chapter headings came to his mind. He realized with a shock what line his thoughts were pursuing, and he pulled them back to the 'verse': the priest had told him to let his mind rest fully on its meaning while repeating it. Unknown to him his thoughts slipped out and romped about—chiefly about the fruits of the penance he was undertaking...He visualized his future...(56).

Capturing the Flow of Thoughts

Narayan captures the flow of Margayya's thoughts and thus makes the readers realize how intensely he reacts to a life of deprivation and how much he wants to rise above his circumstances. Narayan's narrative technique also makes the reader aware of the real emotions Margayya goes through, as well as the mask that he puts on for the everyday world, thereby ensuring tolerance for his follies.

Similarly, there is another scene towards the end of the novel in which Narayan's narrative method takes us into the consciousness of Margayya's wife Meenakshi, when she is reacting to a quarrel between her husband and her son Balu. Here Narayan's narrator moves deftly in and out of the minds of his characters, testifying to the skill with which he manipulates narrative perspective and utilizes the technique to further his thematic concerns.

Dual Narrative Structure

In The Guide Narayan makes use of the dual narrative structure. The novel opens in the third person with Raju taking refuge in the neglected village temple where he meets Velan. In the first six chapters the point of view alternates between the third and the first person narration.

The first person narration gives the reason for Raju's lonely wanderings, and also about his past, while the third person narration is used to describe the present—how Velan mistakes him for a holy man and the subsequent events that lead to Raju's enforced fast. Chapter seven to eleven is in the first person narrative where Raju relates his story to Velan in order to show that he is not a holy man. The last chapter, narrated in the third person, portrays Raju's enforced martyrdom. Nirmal Mukherji points out that

the dual narrative structure and the consistently braided time scheme contributes towards a better and deeper understanding of the hero who is both a swindler and a holy man. By alternating the two time scheme at sharp intervals, Narayan has been able to bring into focus those aspects of Raju's character which are essential for the analysis of the inner confusion... Within these sections of Raju's confessions are embroidered the strands of the narrative which are related by the omniscient author. (372-73).

Narrative Strategies Adequate to His Distinctive View of Life

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Narayan is, indeed, a careful craftsman who has devised narrative strategies adequate to his distinctive view of life. The above analysis shows that although Narayan's novels appear to be simple, he adopts complex narrative techniques and is capable of experimenting with narrative perspectives, time schemes, and different levels and voices of narration.

The above analysis shows Narayan as a traditional storyteller for whom stories come naturally and do not have to be shaped in any way. Narayan's narrator is often a detached and amused observer of events, whose emotional involvement with the story is minimum. His first and third person narrators show little variation among themselves and carry an unmistakable imprint of their creator.

Fakrul Alam observes that Narayan is a "conscious craftsman, a novelist who believes in the concept of appropriate form, a subtle manipulator of point of view, a writer whose devices can never be taken for granted, a master of the art of fiction" (9).

Presenting Indian Consciousness through the Medium of English

The problem of presenting Indian consciousness, of presenting reality as seen by Indian eyes through the medium of English, has always been a formidable one for the Indian writer. But Narayan's work "is an original blend of Western method and Eastern material and he has succeeded in... making an Indian sensibility wholly at home in English art" (Walsh 1971, 3).

Narayan does not experiment with the English language in any obtrusive way. Through skilful use of the language, Narayan has succeeded in depicting the customs and manners of a particular region. William Walsh observes that Narayan's style

is limpid, simple, calm and unaffected natural in its run and tone, and beautifully measured to its purpose. It has neither the American purr of the combustion engine nor the thick marmalade quality of British English, and it communicates with complete ease a different and Indian sensibility. (1971, 7)

Narayan asserts that he has chosen to write in English because it came to him very easily. He once told William Walsh:

Until you mentioned another tongue I never had any idea that I was writing in another tongue. My whole education has been in English from the primary school, and most of my reading has been in the English Language...I am particularly fond of the language. I was never aware that I was using a different, a foreign, language when I wrote in English, because it came to me very easily. (1971, 7)

Narayan's familiarity with the popular Western magazines like Strand, London Mercury, Harper's and The Atlantic must have helped him to avoid the pedantic and the archaic. His early journalistic career must have taught him the virtues of crispness and precision. He is never tired of stressing the flexibility, charm and excellence of the English language as a medium of expression. According to him English is no longer an alien language in India. He says:

For me, at any rate, English is an absolutely Swadeshi language. English of course, in a remote horoscopic sense, is a native of England, but it enjoys, by virtue of its uncanny adaptability, citizenship in every country of the world. It has sojourned in India longer than you and I and is entitled to be treated with respect. It is my hope that English will soon be classified as a non-regional Indian language. (Aspects 20)

Arguing in Favor of English Getting Assimilated in Indian Soil

Narayan further argues that whatever be its official status, English must get assimilated in soil of India and grow again from it (Aspects 20-21). He even visualizes "a Bharat brand of English", "which will have a Swadeshi stamp about it unmistakably like the Madras hand-loom check shirt or the Tirupathi doll" (Reluctant Guru 57).

Narayan's English

Narayan undoubtedly writes English with a distinct Indian colouring, which makes its presence felt in a number of ways. One can make an extensive analysis of Narayan's use of Indianisms, which include words from Tamil, Sanskrit and Hindi, as for example, 'Dhoti', 'Pyol', 'Jutka' 'Salt' etc. Translations of Tamil expressions like 'worshipping room', 'dinning leaf' and 'sitting plank' as well as certain coinages like 'led about by a nose-rope like a bullock' and 'half-arm shirt' can also be found in his works, apart from compound words like 'semi-interest', 'bull-calf', 'dung-cake', betel nut-spittle', 'nose-screw', 'stitching master', 'foreign-returned people', slow-witted', 'red-tapists' and collocations like 'even if I have seven births, I won't be able to repay my debt to you' and 'what sin have I committed to observe these harsh words'.

Narayan makes use of direct translations from Indian idioms and expressions such as 'My professor will eat me up', 'to the dust pot with your silly customs' and 'The unbeaten brat will remain unlettered'.

P.S. Sundaram points out some of the awkward expressions like "I and the baby will travel down quite safely", 'what is wrong in it?' and 'what have you done for dinner' (133-34).

Professor Kantak compares Narayan prose style to a “one stringed instrument” which lacks amplitude. He also underlines the fact that Narayan’s use of the English language is extremely limited:

He does not seem to interest in exploring the fuller, deeper possibilities of the language he is using. Word or Phrase rarely glints with compression or suggested meaning. They are just—their own declared selves. The sentence has a certain structural monotony. It is always the same subject—predicate—object—complement ensemble with a few subsidiary appendages of phrase and clause and occasional inversion. (134)

An Inattentive, Quick Writer?

Uma Parameswaran observes that Narayan is careless. “There are a number of sentences in every Narayan novel that can be markedly improved by simple changes in syntax or diction. The truth is that he never rewrites, never revises” (60). Narayan himself once told Ved Mehta: I am an inattentive, quick writer who has little sense of style” (79).

Narayan’s style is impressive when fused with humour, but on other occasions it becomes dull and uninteresting. It is true that Narayan’s language is simple and conventional. Purity and simplicity characterize his diction. He is wary of abstractions and employs concrete vocabulary that make a direct appeal to the senses. His stories are distinguished by ease, naturalness of language, and smoothness and shortness of sentences.

Genuine and Simple – The Triumph of the Common

Like the traditional Indian story-teller, Narayan has an easy flow of words, and certainly does he entertain but not at a brisk, rollicking pace. The laughter he evokes is genuine and simple. Like the traditional story-teller he instructs in a mild way, but does not indulge in social criticism. He is not a great novelist in the sense of a western tradition, but “he affirms the average” and at the end of each novel one can find “the triumph of the common in spite of the invasion of it by the eccentric” (Parameswaran 48).

Such a positive vision is Narayan’s contribution to modern fiction. Ramesh Shrivastava argues that the simplicity of Narayan’s prose style originates not from his simple vision, but from his incapacity to write a multi-dimensional prose (203). He is not capable of depicting intensity of emotions or imaginative or evocative descriptions. S.C.Harrex observes that comedy of manners is an important aspect of Narayan’s comic style and it is not confined to an isolated novel or story (114-15). He exploits, for humorous purposes, social conventions and moral codes, religious custom and ritual, and communal attitudes.

Narration and Ironic Sense

Narration and ironic sense are Narayan's forte. The smooth flow of narration is often suddenly broken by an "ironic thrust, which proves all the more effective by contrast" (Naik 138). In describing places and persons, Narayan practices an admirable economy and concentrates on concrete details, which give verisimilitude. The personal appearance of his characters is sparingly done and he gives a brief description of the significant aspects and leaves the rest to the reader's imagination.

The above analysis of the language and style of Narayan shows that the simplicity of his style is consistent with the simple honesty of his vision. He lacks poetic imagination and he is content with describing the external details without penetrating beneath the surface. His art shows no progression, for he confine him selves to his limited range and theme. He knows his limitations and seldom ventures beyond. This quality turns many of his weaknesses into qualified virtues.

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