

Wit, Humour and Satire in R.K. Narayan's Selected Short Stories in *Malgudi Days*

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Abstract – R.K. Narayan enjoyed wide popularity not only in India but abroad also particularly in England and U.S.A. In America he is regarded next to Faulkner. He was also included in *Writers and Their Works* published by The British Council - only Indian to achieve this distinction. Many of his short stories were broadcasted by B.B.C. - a rare distinction. Both University of Leeds and Delhi University honored him with the degree of D. Litt. Moreover he won Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *The Guide* (1958) in 1960 and The Indian Government awarded him with Padma Bhushan in 1964 for his achievements. The sole aim of his all writings is to give aesthetic satisfaction. Wit is an acute perception and cleverly appropriate expression of ideas providing amusement and pleasure. It wholly depends upon apt phrasing. So any poet or short-story writer may reveal himself as a wit when he pleases with appropriate phrasing of language. In comparison with wit, humour is less obviously mental in its approach to the weakness, foibles and absurd ideas and actions of people generally. Satire is a literary device which is used to expose a folly or a vice. The main objective of this paper is to show that R. K. Narayan is more a humorist than a satirist. In fact, he is the greatest humorist among the short story writers. His humour is all pervasive and most varied. His comic art has a universal and perennial quality.

Keywords: - Humour, Wit, Satire, Foibles, Malgudi.

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There are thirty-two short stories in the collection *Malgudi Days* (1982); sixteen from *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947), eight from *Lawley Road* (1956) and eight from *New Stories* (1981). Short stories appearing in *Malgudi Days* from the collection *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* include: "An Astrologer's Day", "The Missing Mail", "The Doctor's Word", "Gateman's Gift", "The Blind Dog", "Fellow-Feeling", "The Tiger's Claw", "Iswaran", "Such Perfection", "Father's Help", "The Snake-Song", "Engine Trouble", "Forty-Five a Month", "Out of Business", "Attila" and "The Axe". The short stories contained in *Malgudi Days* (1982) from *Lawley Road* are: "Lawley Road", "Trail of the Green Blazer", "The Martyr's Corner", "Wife's Holiday", "A Shadow", "A Willing Slave", "Leela's Friend" and "Mother and Son". The short stories included in *Malgudi Days* (1982) from *New Stories* (1981) collection are: "Naga", "Selvi", "Second Opinion", "Cat Within", "The Edge", "God and the Cobbler", "Hungry Child" and "Emden".

Narayan is at his best when he blends satire with humour-in particular, when he chooses a contemporary situation, which affects the common man's daily routine in no small measure. On such occasions he is able to bring in a great deal of significant detail in a story of not much length. He

does not feel here, as he does frequently, the necessity of having to linger upon some irrelevant fact; and he is carried away by the themes so fully that the picture is allowed to present itself. The short story entitled "Lawley Road", which appears in both the collections *Lawley Road* (1956) and *Malgudi Days* (1982) is not only mild satire but also rich in humour. In this beautiful piece Narayan humorously narrates the activities and doings of municipal council. The Municipal Chairman of Malgudi tries to give a modern look to the town to celebrate the country's fifteenth Independence Day. It is how R. K. Narayan describes unbound enthusiasm of the Municipal Chairman to celebrate this occasion:

He called up an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the names of all the streets and parks in honour of the birth of independence. (100)

In this way board from Victoria Coronation Park was uprooted and a brand-new sign stood in its place declaring it "Hamara Hindustan Park". It is an amusing way when Narayan describes:

The town became unrecognizable with new names. Gone were the Market Road, North Road, Chitra

Road, Vinayak Mudali Street and so on. In their place appeared the names, repeated in four different places, of all the ministers, deputy ministers and the members of the Congress Working Committee. (100)

It creates a lot of fuss and hubbub among the local people—letters went where they were not wanted. People forgot about their existence and where they were living. The satire is obvious when R.K.Narayan says: "The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone" (100). Narayan's humour is at its best in this story when he describes in an amusing interesting way, how the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley is put on sale: "Statue for sale. Two and a half tons of excellent metal. Ideal gift for a patriotic friend. Offers above ten thousand will be considered (104)".

Thus Malgudi at different points of time experiences the swift changes that make a mark on the orthodox Indian society with its old culture and traditions, beliefs and superstitions. Characters caught up in pressures of these fast changes, are seen in various comic postures. In this context Graham Greene in Introduction to *The Financial Expert* (1952) remarks ". . . the life of Malgudi never ruffled by politics, proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provide much of the comedy".¹

Narayan's short stories about animals is depict animals as skilful as human beings. The story entitled "Attila" which appears in *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947) as well as *Malgudi Days* (1982) is rich in humour. The Talkative man tries to keep a pet dog for the family. The family felt a great satisfaction for paying an advance of seventy-five rupees to take the pet home. That is how Narayan describes in a humorous manner why the family keeps a dog:

The immediate reason for buying him was a series of house-breakings and thefts in the neighborhood, and our householders decided to put more trust in a dog than in the police. (85)

There is a prolonged debate on what the dog should be named. So following debate among the children amuses every reader:

The youngest suggested, "Why not call him Tiger?"

"Every other street mongrel is named Tiger", came the reply.

"Why not Caesar?"

"Caesar! If a census was taken of dogs you would find at least fifteen thousand Caesars in South India alone Why not Fire?"

"It is fantastic."

"Why not thunder?"

"It is too obvious."

"Grip?"

"Still obvious and childish. (85-86)

There was a deadlock. Someone suggested Attila and a shout of joy and noise went up to the sky. In this way the dog is named Attila. The family anticipated that the most ferocious blood might be running in his veins but Attila exhibited a love of humanity, which was something disconcerting to the family. All the people doubt Attila's ferocity and power and make a fun of him. But the youngest son, who always praises his dog, utters a witty remark: "Let our dog reach the parallel of fourteen years and people would get to know its real nature" (86).

The dog did not fulfill their promises kept on him. He welcomes every stranger in the house warmly. This is how R. K. Narayan describes dog's nature in a humorous manner:

He stood up twenty inches high, had a large frame and a forbidding appearance on the whole-but that was all. A variety of people entered the gates of the house every day: mendicants, bill-collectors, postmen, tradesmen and family friends. All of them were warmly received by Attila. (86)

The mother in the family is against the dog and calls it "Blind Warm". Her verbal humour is a rich source of comedy in the story: "He eats like an elephant", said the mother of the family. "You can employ two watchmen for the price of the rice and meat he consumes" (86). She further says:

"Well somebody comes every morning and steals all the flowers in the garden and Attila won't do anything about it."

"He has better business to do than catch flower thieves", replied the youngest, always the defender of the dog.

"What is the better business?"

"Well, if somebody comes in at dawn and takes away the flowers, do you expect Attila to be looking out for him at that hour? (87)

As expected by the mother Ranga, a local burglar, stole all the jewellery and other valuable things, which he could find out. The dog in place of rescuing the goods, helps the thief to run away secretly:

Ranga whispered, "I hope you aren't going to bark...."

"Don't you worry, I am not the sort", the dog tried to say.

"Just a moment, Let me get down from here", said the burglar. (87)

Attila ran away with the thief and did not come back. He liked his new friend so much that he would not leave him alone for a moment. The entire family got worried about dog's absence. Attila's disappearance created a sensation in the bungalow and the family did not have the courage to mention the theft in the family to anyone. But the mother still feels happy and thanks the thief to make the family conscious about the true breed of the dog in these lines:

Whatever it is, I don't know if we should after all thank the thief for taking away that dog. He may keep the jewels as a reward for taking him away. Shall we withdraw the police complaint? (88)

But this very dog helps the family in detecting the thief because one day the eldest son of the house saw Attila trotting behind someone on the road. The dog proves to be a hero for the family. The family feels a proud for the dog and even the mother, who always criticizes the dog, starts favouring it when she utters the following remark about the dog: "Whatever one might say of Attila, one has to admit that he is a very cunning detective. He is too deep for words" (89).

Thus Narayan's humour arises from his sympathetic treatment of a human weakness and portrayal of this life is, thus, severely restrained by a rigorous discipline of art. It precludes all that falls outside his periphery of observation and knowledge. The urban middle class setting in the south of India is his milieu as a painter of life. His characteristic stance as a delineator of men and manner comes out in Dr. Iyengar's oft quoted comment ". . . he is content, like Jane Austen, with his 'little bit of ivory', just so many inches wide: he would like to be a detached observer, to concentrate on a narrow scene, to sense the atmosphere of the place, to snap a small group of characters in their oddities and angularities: he would, if he could, explore the inner countries of the mind, heart and soul, catch the uniqueness in the ordinary, the tragic in the prosaic."²

The story "The Trial of Green Blazer" which appears in *Malgudi Days* (1982) is full of irony and humour. The humour rises from the character of Raju who is a pick-pocket always and keeps bluffing his wife that he is earning money from various businesses etc. When Raju reaches home with too much money, he had always to take care of his cash to conceal it in an envelope and shove it under a roof otherwise his

wife asked too many questions and made him and her miserable. She firmly believes that the cash showed by her husband was commission that he earns in various businesses. So Raju continues with his profession on such occasion follows a gentleman with the green blazer. Acknowledging him, his next victim Raju wittily observes:

The hunter in the forest could count his day a success if he laid his quarry flat; but here one had to extract the heart out of the quarry without injuring it. (107)

Raju, the pickpocket expertly, picks the purse of the man in the green blazer and removes the cash from it. But when he was about to throw the purse away, he notices a toy balloon folded and tucked away inside it and is filled with thoughts of affection and pity for the child for whom it meant. Narayan gives a moving account of Raju's state of mind in an amusing way: "This is for a motherless boy. I have promised it him. If it bursts or gets lost before I go home, he will cry all night and I would not like it at all" (108).

So Raju tries to put the purse back in Green Blazer's pocket and is caught red-handed in the process. Raju is taken to police, beaten up and he displays his wit in the following line: "I . . . I was trying to put back your purse" (110). Later also Raju resolves that never again he will ever sympathize with anyone because: "Those fingers were out meant to put anything back" (110).

Readability as in this short story, as in other collections has remained R.K.Narayan's criterion of storytelling. He has never professed any high-sounding moral precepts nor has he claimed to fathom the depths of human experience. In this context I would like to quote C. Paul Verghese who writes, "The instruments of his critical strategy are comedy, irony and satire. Narayan keeps very close to surface reality, for his aim is to reveal the tragic-comedy implicit in ordinary life. His problem is to give the reader a picture that strikes him as typical of everyday reality. For this he depends on selection. He, therefore, excludes from his picture such aspects of reality as are not susceptible to comic treatment."³

In the story entitled "Wife's Holiday" in the collection *Malgudi Days* (1982), humour arises from the actions of Kannan, the central character in the story. He feels extremely happy because his wife went to her parents. So he feels happy alone at home. He humorously reflects: "If she were here, would she let me rest like this? (117).

So he wants to go to Mantapam in the afternoon to gamble there to make his money double. He wants to celebrate his wife's absence by staying away from home most of the day. But the worst of it was that he had not a quarter of an *anna* in his pocket. So an

idea comes to his mind and he starts investigating his wife's belongings in a trunk. In this story humour arises from the following action of Kannan:

An idea struck him and he suddenly rose to his feet and turned in. In a corner there was a large tin trunk, painted black years ago – the most substantial possession of that household. It was his wife's. He sat down before it and stared at the lock helplessly. It was a cast iron lock with sharp edges. He took hold of it and, tugged at it, and much to his surprise, it came off. "God is kind to me," he told himself, and threw open the lid. (119)

Kannan steals his child's money box laying in the corner of the trunk, shook it, held the slit up to light and tried to find out how much it contained. He shakes the box upside down many times violently but all uselessly and Kannan paused to ask him using his wit:

"Am I right in taking my youngster's money?"

"Why not?" whispered a voice within seductively.

"Son and father are the same." (120)

He somehow break opens the box, goes to Mantapam, luck deserts him and within a short time he lost all his money. When he reaches home he is surprised to see his wife already at home. Kannan opened the door and went in. His son gives him a couple of coins to put them in the box. His son comes to know what happened with his box and asked the reason for that. Father held up his thumb and mumbled and humorously says: "Nothing I have crushed my thumb" (121). Thus in this story humour mingles with pathos and we smile through our tears. As M.K. Bhatnagar writes in his book, "Like his humour, his pathos is mild and delicate."⁴

The setting of most of Narayan's stories is Malgudi, but it is interesting to note that unlike his novels, some stories are enacted entirely against a background other than that of Malgudi. Madras provides the background for stories like, "A Willing Slave", and "Mother and Son" in the short story collection *Malgudi Days* (1982). "A Willing Slave" is a touching story of an old, wizened, poor and illiterate ayah whose only religion is loving service to children. The story cannot be classified as story of character, in which the psychology of the protagonist is the chief point. In the story the old servant who looks after young Radha always frightens her ward by telling her about the Old Fellow (meaning Ayah's husband) who wants to carry away his wife. One day the Old Fellow actually arrives to carry away his wife and Radha, who is mortally afraid of him, does not even come out to bid Ayah good-bye. In the story we laugh at innocence of Radha as well as pathos created by Narayan :

Radha asked, "Is the Old Fellow carrying you off?"

"Yes, dear, bad fellow."

"Who left the door of the dog house open?"

"No one. He broke it open."

"What does he want?"

"He wants to carry me off", said the Ayah.

"I won't come out till he is gone. All right. Go, go before he comes here for you." The Ayah acted on this advice after waiting at the kitchen door for nearly half an hours. (131)

"Mother and Son" is one of the tenderest and emotional stories of R.K. Narayan in the short story collection *Malgudi Days* (1982). In this story Ramu's mother forces him to marry her brother's daughter who was getting on to fourteen, a good-looking girl. In the story mother using her wit says: "A man's luck changed with marriage" (138).

In the story humour arises when Narayan contrasts how the mother persuades her son for marriage and how she melts when Ramu disappears from the house without saying anything to his mother. Mother began to feel uneasy. She could not sleep at night, had a horrible dream about Ramu's suicide by drowning in Kukanahalli Tank. Unknown to herself mother sleeps in snatches and wakes up with a start every time the gong boomed. She reaches the tank and does not dare even once to look at the water. She finds Ramu sleeping on one of the benches there. She just for a second wonders if it may be his corpse and Narayan's humour is obvious when mother and son met each other:

She shook him vigorously, crying "Ramu!"

She heaved a tremendous sigh of relief when he stirred.

He sat up rubbing his eyes. "Why are you here Mother?"

"What a place to sleep in!"

"Oh, I just feel asleep", he said.

"Come home", she said. She walked on and he followed her. She saw him going down the tank steps "Where are you going?"

"Just for a wash," Ramu explained.

She clung to his arm said vehemently, "No, don't go near the water."

He obeyed her, though he was slightly baffled by her vehemence. (141)

The story entitled "Leela's Friend" in the collection *Malgudi Days* (1982) is more delightful than the two short stories discussed above. The story is about Sidda, a servant in the South Indian Hindu family. Sidda is given two meals a day, four rupees a month in return he has to wash clothes, tend the garden, chop wood and look after Leela. Leela likes Sidda, his servant and friend, since his very first day at her house. She utters a cry of joy when he comes at their home: "Oh father" she said, "I like him. Don't send him away. Let us keep him in our house" (132). Sidda entertains the girl using his wit. Leela clapped her hands and screamed in wonder, "The moon here! It was there! How is it?" "I have asked it to follow us about." (133)

Days pass and one day the girl lost her chain somewhere. Sidda, the servant had also vanished into the night. Rebuking the child for her mistake her mother says: "It was God's mercy that he had not killed the child for the chain... (135). Leela at the loss of her chain says: "Let him I will have a new chain" (136).

In the story there is a single stroke of irony because Sidda did not steal the chain. It is this ironic complication, which enhances the comic effect in the story. When the girl demands Sidda to play with her friend, family and police calls him a scoundrel as: "You are not at all a reliable prosecution witness my child", observed the inspector humorously" (136).

R.K. Narayan's inhabitants are often recognizably and recurrently the same everywhere. In this context R.K. Narayan himself writes in author's *Introduction to Malgudi Days* (1982), "I can detect Malgudi characters even in Newyork . . ." ⁵ In his story stories he loves the eccentricities, absurdities and oddities of his characters and laugh at them and the reader gratefully falls for the contagion of his humanism. His stories "Cat Within" and "Emden" though familiar in tone and texture have the some comic elements. As Shiv K. Gilra writes in his book, "They are full of wit, humour and irony and provide a pleasurable and individual aesthetic experience for the reader."⁶ In nut shell Narayan's aim in his short stories is to give to his readers a picture that strikes him as typical of everyday life through a careful selection of the material and he tries to exclude that material which is not suitable for comic treatment.

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