

# A Critical Study of Short-Story Writing in English with Special Reference to Indian Short-Story Writers Particularly R.K. Narayan

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**Abstract** – So far as a brief history of short story is concerned, it developed slowly in all the major languages of the world, in the respective countries from stories like the legends of ancient Greece, Rome and Scandinavia, Aesop's Fables, and the tales told by Chaucer, Boccaccio and others. There were also the stories contained in the Bible and those of the Arabian Nights Entertainments. Similarly we have had in India stories which lie imbedded in the hymns of the Rigveda or scattered in the Upanishads and two epics, the stories which constitute the Panchatantra, the Hitopadesha, the Suka Saptati, the Dashakumara Charita, the Katha Saritsagara and the Vetala-panchavimsati in Sanskrit, the Buddhist Jataka, stories in Pali and a host of similar stories in our modern Indian languages. Most of these ancient and medieval tales were didactic in purpose and moral in tone. These series of events loosely strung together with no attention paid to the artistic principles of plot or characterization. They gave rise to short story first in the regional languages of the country and with the coming of English Education System, short story as a literary genre in English. Short stories of the modern type are a product of the 19th century. Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were its masters in America. French and Russian masters of this art like Maupassant, Chekhov and others propelled the short story further on its way of progress by introducing into it naturalism and realism. Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens Mrs. Gaskell Thackeray, Antony Trollope and R. L. Stevenson made the short story firmly established form of art in England capable of communicating varied impressions of life and evoking all kinds of emotions. Even writers like O' Henry and Katherine Mansfield made their mark in literature only with their short stories. Hoffmann and Grimm made short stories popular in Germany. Thomas Hardy, Kipling, Galsworthy, H.G. Wells, Hemingway, Faulkner were its principal practitioners in the 20th century. All these writers, so different from one another in their outlook of life; their temperament and their methods, have yet found in the short story one of the finest vehicles for communication of their experiences of life.

Actually Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan is the most artistic writer that India ever produced. The bulk of his writings is very large including fifteen novels and eleven short stories collections, Next Sunday (1960) - a collection of essays and sketches, My Dateless Diary (1960) which is useful regarding his experiences with the people like Aldous Huxley and Greta Garbo, publishers, professors and students whom Narayan met during his first visit to U.S.A. In addition to this he edited a journal "The Indian Thought". The short stories of R.K. Narayan include Dodu and Other Stories (1943), Cyclone and Other Stories (1945), An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories (1947), Lawley Road (1956), A Horse and Two Goats (1970), Malgudi Days (1982), Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories (1985), The Grandmother's Tale and Selected Stories (1993), The Watch Man, and Fruition Forty. Narayan hated present system of education and felt that it hampered the free thinking and natural play of fancy. In fact, his short stories reflect the real Indian sensibility with perfect harmony of style and subject. The authenticity and realistic narration actually come from his objective and detached spirit with which he writes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since prehistoric ages, man felt an urge from within to tell and hear stories. This urge is an inherent and essentially human phenomenon that comes to human beings so naturally. The fabulous wonderful tales of adventure not only satisfy man's hunger for entertainment, but also become a medium of

communication for people. We all not only get pleasure in listening to these tales, but also, they broaden man's imagination. They give further scope for imagination. In this way, they guide a man through difficult times and teach him certain basic principles of life.

Even before the art of writing was invented by William Caxton (1422-91), the art of narrating and listening to stories was very much there. Of course, the stories were narrated orally and were transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next generation. Before going to bed at night, children would learn such fabulous tales of adventures and worries of knights, demons and fairies from grandparents and would marvel at the valour of the great legendary heroes. Years later, they would narrate the same stories to their children and later to their grandchildren. And the process would go on through ages. The fables of *Panchatantra*, tales from *Arabian Nights* and *Jataka Tales* are some of the universally celebrated collections of such tales, as they not only entertain and amuse but also bear a moral in them as well. Even the epic belongs to the same tradition of telling and listening to a story.

With the advent of literary art, the yearning for tales acquired new dimensions. The range and scope of the stories became extensive, wide and universal. Now the storyteller did not limit his fanciful flights of imagination to great miseries and adventures of knights, demons and fairies. Neither did he stick to the animal world of fables. Through his new inventions he started putting forth, before the readers, the life itself in all its shades and colours. Now he tried to explore various manifestations of life, which primarily included the inter-personal relationship, man's interaction with nature, the theme of growing up through the learning experiences of life and other social issues. Whatever is the aspect, human relationship continued to be the core of any literary writing.

The tradition of telling and listening to stories has successfully been through many ages and has continued flourishing in the present time as well. Though both the teller and the tales have changed considerably, the basic purpose of telling or reading stories remains still the same. In a country like India, anyone who sets out to write serious fiction has a moral responsibility to shoulder. This relationship is to be seen from the perspective of the betterment of society and culture. Sometimes the author through his work provides an outlet to his innermost, hitherto unexpressed feelings and purges his mind of these emotions. Sometimes, he conveys to the readers his observations of social and cultural set up, thus performing the role of a social reformer. Yet another role that an author can play and which he fits into naturally, is, that he should be a genuine interpreter. He must be talented enough to express through the power of words - the general and the particular, the physical and the psychological, the outer and the inner. As he is more sensitive, more observant and more articulate part of the society with his organic sensibility, he must shoulder the responsibility to interpret life in all its shades and colours for the common man.

This role is rather challenging for an author and becomes the hallmark of his success and greatness. If a writer is considered a great artist, it is only because he is a genuine interpreter of life and he depicts its joys and sorrows, ups and downs, calmness and uneasiness in his work. This is, in fact, what great authors of all times and all climes have been trying to do since times immemorial. In the present day context, this role becomes all the more crucial for an author as the focus has now shifted from the physical to the psychological, from the outer to the inner, in view of the drastic changes taking place in every discipline of life—social, cultural, political and economic. Science and technology are perhaps at their peak.

As such man's aspirations and desires have also undergone tremendous changes resulting into cropping up of various physical as well as psychological complexities. Therefore, the author has to play a sheet anchor role in society. He has to interpret the complex and intricate patterns of human psychology and behaviour by delving deep into the toured soul of individual. He has to redefine inter-personal relationships and keep the question of identity afresh.

Indian's contribution to the tradition of short story writing has never been second to that of any other country. Even in English language, which is a language entirely alien to them, Indians have contributed exceptionally well. Today Indian literature in English is a reality. There was a time when most of the English and American critics and scholars frowned upon the practitioners of Indo-Anglian literature and did not consider them on a par with their British and American counterparts. It was largely because they had a misconception in their minds regarding the potentials of Indian English writers. They thought that Indians could not express themselves creatively in English as effectively as the English, for it was not their first language and hence there could be no "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" for them in this language.

But now, things have changed considerably and with them have changed the narrow outlook of the western world towards Indian- English literature. In this connection Uma Parameswaran quotes David McCutcheon, "By a strange irony, Indian literature in English has been flourishing since independence more successfully than it ever flourished before" (5). Indian English authors have made their presence felt in literary galleries throughout the world.

Narration is as natural to an Indian as leaves to a tree. So for short-story as a literary genre in India is concerned, it came into existence in almost all the Indian languages, when the mythological, adventurous and marvelous stories had exhausted their possibilities and the novel had got

established. In different regions it came to be described as *katha*, *akhyana*, *upakhyana*, *afsana* and *dastan*. Different authors in all the regional languages try to reveal the varied distinctiveness of form and its perception on the part of the author as well as the readers. They had a strong desire to distinguish his stories from the old one. The journals and periodicals encouraged the writings like character - sketches and the reportage of incidents. The entry of the common man and radio also played an important role in the development of the short story in India.

So now it has become imperative to define short story and to distinguish it from the novel. For the first it is neither a rival to novel nor a substitute to novel but it has grown side by side with the novel. A short story writer only exhibits some or one or at the most a few salient features of a character. The short story writer's concentration is always on the main motive. But the novel, in this respect, is far superior to short-story as short story cannot exhibit life in all its variety and complexity like a novel. It cannot exhibit the gradual evolution of its characters as a novelist very often does. So it is wrong to call the short story, a novel on a reduced scale. It shares some features from anecdotes tales, sketches, reportage and novellas but it developed its own distinctiveness identified by the presence of a conscious narrative, for grounding a particular incident, or a situation, or a document of emotional intensity. Its duration is half hour to one hour and in this connection Ian Reid writes that, "It is capable of being perused at one sitting" (9). Its elasticity encompasses and accepts anything and everything under the sun for its subject. Brevity is also the keynote of a short story. It has a definite technique of its own and has its specified requirements of matter and treatment. Dialogues also occupy a very prominent place in the short story, as in a novel or in a drama. They make it charming and easy to read. The artistic enjoyment provided by it is not less than that of a novel. But those who have gone to the extent of announcing that it has become a domineering form of literature which will dethrone the novel one day are absolutely wrong.

As mentioned earlier also Indian's contribution to the short story writing in English has never been second to that of any other country. There is a long series of writers who contributed in their own way in this literary form. Describing the aim of a short story writer Dr. C. V. Venugopal writes, "To present an overall satisfying and unifying picture of a vast area, through a general observation of the men and the land, has perhaps been the dominating motive behind every Indian short story writer in English. What he wanted to say in a direct way is to establish a quick rapport with the reader" (13). The prominent practitioners of short story as a literary form included K.S.Venkataramani, K.Nagarajan, Rabindranath Tagore, A.S.P. Ayyar, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao,

Isvaran, Khushwant Singh, K.A. Abbas, Ruskin Bond, Bhabani Bhattacharya and R.K. Narayan.

The earlier writers of short stories in English in India could not treat the short story consciously as a form of art. The earlier practitioners were reformist. They had a zeal for reform and tended to make frequent philosophical comments keeping aware themselves generally to the ancient Indian tale form. In this connection Dr. C.V. Venugopal rightly quotes A.S.P. Ayyar in his classical book, "Almost unconsciously, I find, I develop a didactic tail which my compassion for all life refuse to clip" (25).

Rabindranath Tagore did not write any short story originally in English. He wrote all his stories in Bengali. Different persons translated his short stories from Bengali to English. Manjeri S. Isvaran tries to get at the fundamental truths and values that govern human relationships. His "By Way of Preface" in his collection entitled *A Madras Admiral*, is indeed an essay on the nature and function of the short story as an art form. He believes that a short story writer must try to place before the readers some problem and its resolution, through the artistic treatment of an incident. In his choice of themes and in his treatment of them he is typically Indian. A.S.P. Ayyar also tries to focus the attention of his readers on certain major social problems of the day. The didactic tone in his short stories is too loud to be missed. But his short stories are largely discursive and in the matter of construction has little of the compactness one generally associate with a good short story. Mulk Raj Anand attacks the hypocrisy of the people. He published seven volumes of the short stories. They include *The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934), *The Barber's Trade Union and Other stories* (1942), *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* (1947), *Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories* (1954), *Selected Stories* (1954), *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories* (1959), *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1966). In his short stories, Anand sympathizes with the underdogs of society and reveal their predicament due to social injustice and strong prejudices of the privileged people to them. His zeal for reform through exposure and satire gets its full expression in his long short story "Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts." This story gives us a panoramic view of the contemporary India and provides the author unlimited scope for his comments, satirical or otherwise, on the hundred odd things which have hampered progress all round in India. However, satire does not give to Anand's short stories its true power. He is, on the other hand, more effective, when he simply is interpreting life as it is. This is especially true when he depicts women and children. In nutshell the power and strength of Anand's realistic portrayal give his short stories a tremendous convincing look.

In sharp contrast to Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan approaches the Indian scene with no serious angle

of study. He is more akin to Isvaran in this respect that he has an uncanny eye for detail - both of them create memorable stories out of casual roadside events and characters. But there is much difference between both of them. While Isvaran attempts to see in a casual event some deeper meaning and significance, Narayan is content generally in skimming lightly on the surface of life without preaching anything. He takes life for whatever it is worth, presents those familiar scenes, which amuse or delight him, rarely bothering to touch its deeper and darker aspects. The sole aim of his all writings is to give aesthetic satisfaction. He never considers art a medium of propaganda as in case of M. R. Anand. As Dr. (Mrs) Harinder A. Singh quotes H. Raizada:

The secret of R. K. Narayan's great success and high distinction on the other hand lies in the complete aesthetic satisfaction he provides to his readers. He interprets Indian life purely for 'the art for readers'. He interprets Indian life purely from the 'art for art's sake' points of view, maintaining complete objectivity and perfect impartiality. (6)

As a result, the incongruous and the absurd in life does not annoy him, it only amuses him. This has been the characteristic stance of humorists from Chaucer to Modern times. His success as a writer lies in his ability to communicate this spirit of amusement and delight in life to the reader. That is the reason why 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.

He was never a good student and failed in High School and Intermediate and got his degree when he was twenty-four years old in 1930. Due to this he remained a shy, reserved, diffident and introvert person. Moreover soon after graduation he was called up to contribute to family income. He worked as a Clerk Secretariat and a teacher. But both these professions did not suit him. He left these jobs within one month and devoted his all time to writing. It was unthinkable in those days to become a successful writer. His father also did not like this idea. He married with Rajam in 1935. A daughter, Hema was born but his wife died of typhoid in 1939. All these early failures may have something to do with his tendency to retreat into himself. Moreover, it was a time when there was nothing specific that could be praised as far as life in India was concerned. All these factors developed this ironic vision to present a

mildly satirical picture of life by using wit and humour in his short stories.

In his domain of imagination, Narayan has created a comic world, which is almost Dickensian in its clever blending of the comic and the serious, the fantastic and the realistic. This world has grown over the years, at the same time; it has retained its essential spirit. As quoted by Shiv K. Gidla, "Malgudi is Narayan's Casterbridge". But the inhabitants of Malgudi, although they may have their recognizable local trappings, are essentially humans and hence, have their kinship with all humanity. In this sense, 'Malgudi, is everywhere' (12). In his novels and short stories there is a proper selection and ordering of the material to show that life is same everywhere. In this way the selected region becomes a symbol of the world at large - a microcosm, which reflects the great world beyond. Past history is also given and we see it changing in successive pages and the inhabitants show their kinship with all humanity. In his novels R.K. Narayan studies life's little ironies in Malgudi and there are life's little ironies everywhere. But Narayan's Malgudi is relatively far from the terrible privations and agonies, political conflicts and economic depression of Anand's India.

In Narayan's fiction the comic vision operates in a framework of irony. Similarly the impressive body of R.K. Narayan's short fiction is based on his close ironic observation of life little incidents, a healthy sense of humour coupled with irony and satire. His short stories belong to the native psychological factors, the crisis in the individual's soul and its resolution and above all the detached observation, which constitutes that stuff of fiction that is forced into the background. He uses wit, which is a powerful verbal expression generally brief, clever and deliberately contrived to create surprising and unexpected effect, often resulting in mirth and admiration, to achieve his humour which is a cultural specific term and a perception of incongruities. A large number of R.K. Narayan's short stories in his volumes entitled *The Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947), *Malgudi Days* (1982) and *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985) are built round the principle of simple irony of circumstance, leading to the shock of discovery or surprise or reversal at the end. The title story "An Astrologer's Day" in his volume named *The Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947) is based on the principle of simple irony of circumstance. A town astrologer meets a client and reads his past 'correctly' saying that a man had killed him in a village brawl years ago. He tells the man that a man had knifed him, is dead now and adds, "I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home".

The story ends with the shock of discovery that the astrologer was himself the person who knifed that



man and then the irony of both his reading of the past and his advice to his client is brought home.

A final shock of surprise is the main point of stories like "Missing Mail" and "Out of Business" in the same volume. In the first story, an altruistic postman intentionally hides the news of a relative's death from a family in order that a wedding, which for certain urgent reasons cannot be postponed, can take place on the appointed day. The bride's father comes to know the truth only after the marriage. In "Out of Business" Rama Rao, the central character, wants to commit suicide by falling before a railway train, is saved because the train comes late and reaches home and surprised to find his financial problems temporarily been solved for him. In these stories occasionally, the ironic complications ensure in a linked chain to enhance the comic effect to create humour among the readers. In this context the story named "Engine Trouble" in the volume *Malgudi Days* (1982) is also not an exception. The winner of a stream engine in a lottery finds that the prize is a perfect white elephant for him. It puts him into all kinds of troubles and expenses when he tries to get it moved. He gives rent for parking it, and in the attempt to get it moved by the temple elephant, a compound wall gets demolished and the elephant gets injured involving further damage. In the end, there is a lucky earthquake during which the engine falls into a dilapidated well, which solved at one stroke the problems of the owners of the engine and the well.

Tragic irony does not seem to appeal to Narayan to the same extent as comic irony and the few examples of its kind in his repertoires hardly rank among the best of his efforts in shorter fiction. In the story "Lawley Road" which appears in *Malgudi Days* (1982) the writer exposes the functions of municipality to make a fun of it. The Municipal Chairman in Malgudi tries to give a modern look to the town to celebrate the country's fifteenth Independence. So as Narayan writes:

"He called up an extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the name of all the streets and parks in honour of the birth of independence." As a result board at the Victoria Coronation Park was uprooted and a brand- new sign stood in its place declaring it henceforth "*Hamara Hindustan Park*". In this way "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."

It creates a lot of confusion among people, letters went where, they were not wanted, people forgot about their existence and where they were living. And the satire is obvious when Narayan says:

"The town becomes a wilderness with all its landmarks gone."

Narayan's humour is at its best in this story when the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley is put on sale after uprooting it:

"Statue for sale. Two and a half tons of excellent metal. Ideal gift for a patriotic friend. Offers above then thousand will be considered".

## CONCLUSION

Humour and pathos go parallel to each other in some of R.K. Narayan's short stories. In the connection P.S. Sundaram rightly observes, "It is his sense of humour, his capacity to see the funny side of even the most tragic situation, his essential sanity and moderation which make the great writer he is" (139). "Annamali" in story-story stories collection named *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1947) is a character study. Annamali is a gardener, not knowing much about gardening. He has his own independent and eccentric notions about things. He is simple, naïve, unlettered but unshakably loyal and honest. The story has rich comic quality. The rustic life with its funny squabbles and transaction is realistically portrayed. Annamalai's bond of loan with the village tailor causes the amusing crisis in the story. After fifteen years of service he leaves for his native village to renew his bond. Annamalai's younger brother Amayasai, though, physically away from him, provides great amusement by his letters full of problems, crises and troubles. The story is an interesting character-portrayal, truly and realistically drawn of course, with a touch of humour.

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