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Levels of Reality in the Novels of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan (Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami) is now regarded as one of the greatest of Indian authors writing in English. He is the more artistic of the Indian writers, his sole aim is being to give aesthetic satisfaction to his readers, and not to use his art as a medium of propaganda or to serve some social purpose as is the case with Mulk Raj Anand. Narayan is a pure Artist and not a writer with a message. He minutely observes the life around him, and presents it objectively and artistically. Narayan keeps very close to reality, for his aim is to reveal the tragic- comedy implicit in ordinary life. His picture of life is always true to facts, but to those facts only at which a reasonable being can be expected to smile.

Key Words- *Incongruity, Reality, Humour, Comedy, Pathos.*

A civilized society assures a happy balance between man's elemental nature and conduct as a social being. Human nature aspires towards the gratification of impulses and instincts which in reality are always getting thwarted for one or the other reason the celebration of primary impulses is the chief concern of the comic treatment. As Robert M. Terrence observes, R.K. Narayan is, "comic not primarily because he is laughed at but because-----in the root sense of komos-----he celebrates life of body and mind."¹ The comic hero has his own option to find ways for such a celebration, independent of any rational or moral consideration. This obviously warrants an encounter with the world reality. There is a fundamental incongruity the scheme of things, man's existence encounter with reality appears comic In the novels of R.K. Narayan the

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accent is always on the ordinary man, with his small ambitions and passions alternating between the constructions of an orthodox tradition into which he is born and the carnivals of a free world to which he is driven by his primal instincts and urges. Narayan's comic hero embodies a paradox: he has been reared by the religious rituals and beliefs of an age-old tradition, and on the other hand, he has been moulded by the drives of his elemental self. The orchestration of realities which forms the comic pattern is embedded in the very process of living.

The Swami and Friends clearly illustrates the boundaries of the comic in Narayan's world of fiction. Swami and his friends in their innocence transform the reality of this world to conform to their childlike fancies and successfully live in their own world. As the scenes change from an unpretentious childhood to a shrewd and cultivate adulthood, his comic perspective also changes from conciliation to confrontation.

The Bachelor of Arts successfully presents this aspect of changing perspectives. In the first few pages of the novel, it is always happy, smooth-going life for Chandran. But afterwards the world becomes increasingly hostile to him. His adolescent yearnings for Malathi and his emotional outbursts are dismissed by a realistic world. But events move and change very fast offering some ample scope to the comic hero to display various facets and possibilities of his character in response to the demands of living.

The comic fiction shows the pathetic plight of man who has been put in a system and demands a massive instinctual sacrifice. This sadistic principle is so much entrenched in the fabric of social reality that man with an untamable nature cannot easily reconcile himself to it. To quote Richard Wollheim in this context, man "is placed in the world in such a way that he can experience pain very readily".² This fundamental disorder is built into the very pattern of the universe creating a hiatus between the ideal and the actual, between the individual and the society. The comic hero attempts to work out his life in a strange, hostile environment, led by unknown, uncontrollable drives of the self.

In *Mr. Sampath* one finds a rendezvous of all comic forces. Sampath, Srinivas, Somu, De Mello, Shanti Ravi and many others are frantically involved with one another in bizarre

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relationships. The character of Narayan's novels cannot exist independently. In the grand portrait-gallery of Mr.Sampath exist numerous other comic characters, like the mister landlord who "collected the rent on the second of each month, took away the entire amount and placed it in Saryu street post office bank" (pp.7-8), and at the same time professed himself to be a sanyasi who "bathed at the street tap and which was distributed as a charity in a nearby temple". (p-7). In the character of this greedy, pharisaical old man the comic incongruity is self-evident.

Among all the comic heroes of Narayan, Sampath displays his existential potential to the full and till the very end he remains a comic hero, unbeaten and untiring in spite of the hostility in the world around him. The heroes in R.K. Narayan's novels suffer from a sort of ego-crisis and all their entanglements are the resultant effects of this crisis. In Margayya's case, money at first becomes an essential fact of existence; then it becomes an obsession and perversion. Successes boost his ego to a point where he considers nothing impossible for him.

He has immense confidence in himself now. He could undertake any plan with ease: he could shape his son's future as if it were just as much clay in his hand (p.87).

The Financial Expert is a master entertainer and a source of enlightenment on the philosophy of money. The book abounds in serious outpourings from Margayya on the importance of much discussed necessary evil of money. The financial expert "who graduates from the banyan tree to publishing and back to more elaborate and more crooked banking."³ speculate seriously on the role of money in life. No doubt, money is an important means of meeting our material need, but to consider money as the most powerful and an embodiment of all virtues is to misconstrue the genius of "gaudy gold", Narayan in his *Dairy* humourously records about this inevitable evil, "money should always be a roundabout hinted at subject between friends, only then it is possible to maintain the dignity of human relations."⁴

Narayan's genius is essentially comic, and what makes *The Financial Expert* a great entertainer is its sparkling humour. The whole novel is filled with humorous situations and

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witty remarks, with an undertone of sadness. The novel shows how humour emanates from the most ordinary incidents and affairs of life, If one has an eye to catch it. The comic incongruity can be perceived in terms the two phases of Margayya's career. His struggle against the society that loathes him for being poor and his struggle against his son. With the denouement he moves a full circle and is back at his original position, chastened by his experience, wisdom and humility. It is in this sense that Graham Greene speaks of Margayya as possessing "the hidden poetry and the unrecognized pathos we so often find in Chekhov's characters who on the last page vanish into life".⁵

The poignancy of the tragi-comic clash of generations is more acutely felt in *The Vendor of Sweets*. The aged sweet venin his character.dor, Jagon, is a bundle of contradictions, who skillfully combines his business profits with exalted Gandhian principles. The comic incongruity is apparent in the unique blend of hypocrisy and sincerity in his character. He is capable of simultaneously managing both his spiritual and worldly affaires.

As long as the frying and sizzling noise in the kitchen continued and the trays passed, Jagon nothing, his gaze unflinchingly fixed on the Sanskrit lines in a red bound copy of the Bhagwat Gita but if there was the slightest pause in the sizzling, he cried out without lifting his eyes from the sacred text, 'What is happening' (p-18).

In *The Guide*, such an understanding is made possible by allowing the reader a glimpse into life's mysteries and mynad colours, into its depths and possibilities. Raju, the reckless and the romantic hero, is poised against a whole set of hard realities represented in the forms of Marco, Velan, his mother, Gaffur and many others. He graduates from a small boy helping his father at the shop to the owner of a railway stall and then successively to a guide, a romantic lover, a fake swami and ultimately a martyr. In Raju's character, the ego-crisis is sensitively rendered with,

...the events in the novel also have a thematic significance in that they suggest the apparently hopeless struggle of Raju's submerged individually to achieve an independent identity. This is why we are aware so often of a rather frantic quality in

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Raju's actions and meditations, for all that he keeps up throughout his off-hand, youthfully cheerful manner.⁶

The human situation is portrayed in a short of uncanny atmosphere in *The man-Eater of Malgudi* Vasu, the arrogant taxidermist, leads a gross philistine existence. His highly inflated ego does not brook any challenge, and the humble society of Malgudi can only build a relationship of tame submissive with him. He virtually creates a parallel world where he reigns supreme. He has his own ideas and logic that confound our moral sense and the time-honored social values. He considers to be an unnecessary social institution. For him 'melas' are arranged in our country so that thousands can die on cholera or smallpox or just get trampled as a result of which the population of the country can be kept in 'manageable limits' (p-196), and shooting is not at all terrible and it is just a 'give and take'-(p-176) between the shooter and the object who receives the bullet. His immense physical strength, his fantastic logic and way of life and the very nature of his profession set him in immediate contrast with the docile folk of Malgudi.

He becomes a menace to the smooth flow of life and has his own will and terms. The spirit of independence has taken and exaggerated from in him and he brooks no moral or social barrier while celebrating the urges of his self. Even though Natraj is embarrassed and overawed by Vasu, he feels "a sneaking attraction"⁷ for the latter's spirit of independence and his manly defiance. Vasu jeers at all sorts of social institutions. He belittles the world that does not allow the individual full sovereignty. He beaks the arm of the police inspector. In all his actions he brings down the world around him to its knees. But in spite of all his successes, he remains a solitary, mysterious figure. A proper study of his character and his strange relationship with the world, is not possible unless the workings of his mind are probed. This, of course, depends too much on psycho-analysis. But Vasu's conduct and character cannot be explained without it, as very little is known about him. As Erich Fromm observes:

...the human passions (such as striving for love, tenderness, freedom as well as the lust for destruction, sadism, masochism, the craving for power and property) are

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answers to 'existential needs' which in turn are rooted in the very condition of human existence.⁸

Narayan's protagonists, who are ordinary men and women move out of their orderliness in their quest to make life more pleasurable or meaningful. They passionately cling to a life that time and again betrays and batters them. Thus his novels are tiny worlds where the Lilliputian man with his dreams and sufferings are celebrated; where one finds man untiringly limping across the boundaries of life with the beauty and bruises of existence. He explores subtly the psychic depths of man, brings him close to a world outside himself, and from this orchestration of realities comes out a human comedy.

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