Chapter II

NARAYAN’S WORLD OF MALGUDI

R.K. Narayan’s life spanned the twentieth century, which meant he belonged both to an old world and a new. On October 10, 1906 R. K. Narayan was born as Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanswami in Madras (Chennai). His father was the headmaster and he was transferred to Princely Mysore, Karnataka. But R. K. Narayan spent a number of childhood years living with his maternal grandmother in Madras. His childhood in Madras provided him much capital for creativity. Then he moved to Mysore where he enrolled in the Maharaja’s Collegiate High School where his father was headmaster, a disciplinarian. Theirs was a trilingual household. Tamil being his mother tongue was spoken within the house and Kannada socially with an expanding circle of friends. Narayan’s interest in English Literature was reinforced by his unlimited access to library.

Mysore nurtured Narayan’s fancy and imagination. It provided him ample material for his fiction. He was instinctively resistant to the world of job and routine employment. However, he worked as a school teacher for five days only. Narayan’s ambition was to become a creative writer. But in those days it was not lucrative as it is today and for an Indian to become a successful writer in English was unthinkable. Nevertheless, he consciously gave up his job to become a creative writer. Narayan wrote his first novel, Swami and Friends in 1935. In it he invented the small south Indian town of Malgudi, a literary microcosm that critics later compared to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha Country. More than dozen novels and many short stories that followed were set in Malgudi. Entering the literary world via journalism influenced R. K. Narayan in a significant way. Narayan’s fascination for printing presses and journalism is a part of his vision of life in which man realizes himself in a truthful and purposeful contact with his community. The raw material of the writer comes from the actual world in which he lives and breathes. He chooses matters generally from the day to-day life of man and presents them through the medium of art and beauty in such a way that the readers are charmed right from the beginning to the end. He has his own personal choices and tastes. Narayan had great love for South Karnatic Music. He was good at playing Veena. He spellbinds his
readers taking them through his bewitching stories with something of the strange fascination of the Scheherazade stories of the Arabian Nights.

R. K. Narayan is a born story writer and his reputation as a creative writer in English is applauded all over the world. In March 1961, the Sahitya Academy Award was given to his famous novel The Guide. This novel marked his entry into the realm of renowned novelists and short story writers. Narayan received the Padma Bhushan in 1964 for his great contribution to Indian Literature in English. He has been honoured by U. S. and Indian Universities. The University of Mysore conferred on him D. Lit. He became an Honorary Fellow of the Department of English Literature, American University of Washington.

One of the ‘Big Three’ of Indian English Literature…the other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan has over the years earned for himself a secular place in the realm of literature. These well-known harbingers of new age took Indian English Fiction far from the immature, imitative, romantic and nationalistic narrative of early phase and gave it a firm footing. It’s true that they have distinctive differences in their approach to life and narrative. M. K. Naik observes:

R. K. Narayan is the novelist (short story writer) of individual man, just as Mulk Raj Anand is the novelist of the social man and Raja Rao that of the metaphysical man.¹

Further, M. K. Naik says:

Mulk Raj Anand deals usually with ‘what man has made of man’; Raja Rao with ‘what man should make of God’ or of a force larger than himself and R. K. Narayan with the quintessential irony of what man can make of himself and of the entire business of living.²

The variety of Narayan’s themes and manner of their treatment make his short stories sustained works of creation. His short stories are well-made but being a genius his insistent pursuit make it obvious that his deceptive naivety is rather deliberate. His narrative skill is unmatched; it is enchanting, gripping and convincing. His readers are charmed not only by his plot or the story but also by his narrative skill. We find merely ordinary lives of ordinary people in all its ordinariness. Some of Narayan’s stories are ironical, some mildly fantastic, some comic, some tragic but most of them reflecting the cross-section of social life in India in his era. Sometimes he ends his stories rather abruptly without stitching all the pieces together. In a sense, his stories have no beginning or end. They are just pieces of people’s lives.
Narayan never loses the human touch and that make his stories appeal all readers. He very often talks about human sympathy. In this connection Narayan says:

When I appreciate a character, I don’t exercise any judgment of moral values. For me, they are just interesting psychological specimens. They are interesting as they are.³

Narayan is a pure artist and does not impose his views on readers. He says that why should we take life seriously. As he is not a reformer, his attitude to life seems to be unserious. There is no didacticism, no moral teaching in his fictional world. He cares neither to instruct nor to meditate only to amuse his audience. In this regard Murli Das Melwani comments:

Narayan nowhere states or even suggests his moral purpose, but the quiet, detached philosopher, completely free of the tendency to pass judgment, lurks behind all the stories.⁴

At the same time, and it is noteworthy that Narayan perceives a certain balance in every aspect of human life. His total acceptance of life is praiseworthy. He knows that human nature is a blend of virtue and vice, nobility and knavery. His characters are not wholly black or wholly white. He presents them as human beings.

Objectivity is another important feature of Narayan’s stories; He does not take sides with his characters. His generosity to let everyone live as he/she wishes has given his work breadth and depth. The predicament of his characters is always grounded in reality and always truthful. He depicts it without sentimentality and yet with tenderness. In fact, he has no message or doctrine. K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar says:

He (R. K. Narayan) is a master of comedy who is not unaware of the tragedy of the human situation, he is neither an intolerant critic of Indian ways and modes not their fanatic defender, he is, on the whole, content to snap Malgudi’s little ironies, knots of satiric circumstance, and tragic-comedy of mischance and misdirection.⁵

It seems that Narayan is not a committed writer like Mulk Raj Anand, but this does not mean that he works in a total vacuum. If we study his short stories carefully, we find that he is an ironist. His main concern is to amuse his audience. The point is that he exhibits the follies and foibles of the people implicitly. He is not loud in his intention of correction. In this regard R. K. Narayan’s reply is noteworthy. He says:
The world is full of message-givers and committed writers and one less would make no difference.\(^6\)

R. K. Narayan’s stories reveal the variety of human life. In him we find the artistic zeal, integrity, craftsman and imaginative power in his work. The assessment that “Narayan is a story teller, nothing less and seldom more”\(^7\) points out to the source of R. K. Narayan’s strength rather than that of his weakness. Narayan asserts:

I’d be quite happy if no more is claimed from me than being just a story teller, only the story matters, that’s all.\(^8\)

Though Narayan is acclaimed as one of the reputed novelists, he himself prefers his short stories to his novels and takes delight in writing short stories. He confesses that he writes short stories when he tires of writing novels.

At the end of every novel I have vowed never to write another one- a propitious moment to attempt a short story or two. I enjoy writing a short story. Unlike the novel, which emerges from relevant, minutely worked-out detail the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax.\(^9\)

Though R. K. Narayan has over a half dozen collection of short stories to his credit, many of his short stories were later distributed among the fourth and fifth collections. His fictional world is rich and delightful and in this chapter an attempt is made to examine the stories from the following collections.

1) **Malgudi Days** (First Edition, 1996) 2) **Lawley Road and Other Stories** (1956) 3) **Under the Bunyan Tree and Other Stories** (2011)

### Malgudi: The Fictional Town

Narayan’s Malgudi, a fictional local of his stories breaths the essence of Indian life. It forms the setting of his novels and most of his stories. The fictional world of Malgudi is more than a local; it is a lovable world in microcosm and a symbol of India. It is the Wessex of Thomas Hardy. In fact, Malgudi does not exist on any map of India. It is neither a village nor a city but town of a modest size.
Narayan was often asked the whereabouts of Malgudi. In his introduction to *Malgudi Days* Narayan says:

All I can say is that it (Malgudi) is imaginary and not to be found on any map (although the University of Chicago Press has published a literary atlas with a map of India indicating the location of Malgudi). If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics of Malgudi seem to me universal.\(^\text{10}\)

Narayan’s India seems to be real India and his Malgudi is a living creation of the artist and his appeal is universal. K. R. S. Iyengar rightly observes:

Malgudi is Narayan’s Caster Bridge, but the inhabitants of Malgudi-although they may have their recognizable locale trappings are essentially human and hence have kinship with all humanity. In this sense Malgudi is everywhere.\(^\text{11}\)

Narayan gives a vivid picture of Malgudi with its past, present and growing Malgudi so much so that it becomes a part of living tradition and not mere an island of imagination. What happens in Malgudi happens everywhere in India. It is a country of mind created as a sample of the middle class life in a semi-urban India.

Narayan’s Malgudi is his greatest invention where we find real people, real places in one harmony of day-today existence and eccentricity. His stories depict the triumphs and frustration which we encounter and experience in life. In his stories, we find plain strokes of realism. His cool-headed detachment is discernible almost in every story. The portrayal of life in his fictional town is engagingly realistic.

In Malgudi astrology is generally accepted, though it is not always practiced. It is a town where castes and occupations are stable. It is related to each and every one. It has gone through minor changes. Though it is a fictional creation, Narayan’s Malgudi breaths the aroma of Indian life.

Malgudi liberated the Indian readers from the cold and foggy streets of London into the heat and dust of the fictional South Indian town. The emergence of Malgudi was like ‘a return of the native’ lost in the west with English novelists like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. Malgudi has its own landmarks- The Sarayu River, Lawley Extension, the Statue of Frederick Lawley, Malgudi Station, Kabir Street, the Regal, Hair-cutting saloon, the Bombay Anand Bhavan, etc. Market Road is the ‘life line’\(^\text{12}\) of Malgudi.
Narayan’s portrayal of life seems to be the main objective and it is adequate for the setting of Malgudi. There are characters that give meaning to the places of Malgudi and make them real and life-like. The sense of familiarity of the streets and lanes of Malgudi is homebred. It helps the reader to be intimate. It creates a deeper and better understanding of its people and places establishing a close intimacy. R.K. Narayan should be appreciated for making Malgudi and its people and their value real for the audience. His keen observation, unfailing humour, gentle satire, sympathy, humanitarian point of view, irony should be admired. Graham Green is worth quoting here:

I wait to go out of my door into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certainty of pleasure, a stranger approaching past the bank, the cinema, the hair cutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door on to yet another human existence.\(^{13}\)

Narayan’s characters are human types and their problems are universal problems. What is true of Malgudi is true of India. In the words of Cynthia Driesen: “Malgudi reflects a quality of the larger world.”\(^{14}\) Malgudi is created and developed as a suitable and exotic setting for Narayan’s short stories and novels. P. S. Sundaram observes:

Narayan’s books spring from the mud and river of Malgudi, the scene is Malgudi, but the play is a human not merely an Indian drama.\(^{15}\)

Narayan has an extraordinary power of presenting the multiple facets of life. Though not a critic of society, he is certainly a keen observer of life and manners. A definite vision underlies his stories. This vision could be characterized as humane and comic. What K. R. Shrinivas talks about novel is also applicable to Narayan’s short stories:

Malgudi and Malgudi humanity are the themes of these various fictional essays and each new novel [or a short story] is a jerk of the kaleidoscope when a new engaging pattern emerges to hold our attention.\(^{16}\)

Thus, Narayan brought small town India to his readers in a manner that was both believable and experiential. Malgudi is not just a fictional town, but one teeming
with characters, each with their own idiosyncrasies and attitude, making the situation as familiar to the reader as if it were their own backyard.

Indeed, Malgudi is Narayan’s greatest literary creation. It is alive like a character. In this connection H. M. Williams rightly observes that ‘Malgudi is perhaps Narayan’s greatest character’ \(^{17}\) Even K. R. Shrinivas Iyengar is of the same opinion when he asserts, “….Malgudi is the real ‘hero’ of the eleven novels and many short stories.” \(^{18}\)

Narayan is a pure artist whose purpose is to give artistic pleasure to his readers. Like Hardy creator of Wessex, Narayan has immortalized the region christened by him as Malgudi in his novels and short stories. It seems that Narayan observed Malgudian life in its minutest details. Malgudians are, indeed typical Indians. They are simple, straightforward and gullible and can be easily duped; Malgudi has typical school, schoolmasters, college, the snake charmers, the temples, the worshippers. Narayan has made naked exposition of pretenders in his stories. The topicalities of Malgudi are its realities. Narayan is a realist and he has an eye even for the trivialities of human life. As a sober person, he is interested in the spirit of persons and objects. On the whole, Malgudi is not a saga of ideas and Narayan is not a propagandist, he is a realist of reputation. The reality of temperament runs throughout his fictional setting of Malgudi.

**Ironic Vision**

Irony is a literary artifice which heightens the artistic effect in art. It expresses two meanings-the obvious surface meaning and the hidden meaning. In the Oxford Learners Dictionary ‘Irony’ is defined as the expression of one’s thoughts, in order to make one’s remarks forcefully. Thus irony presents a difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case. Jane Austen’s irony is a delicate perfume and R.K. Narayan’s use of irony is tantamount to Jane Austen. It is always mild, humorous, jovial and full of mirth and vivacity. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao R.K. Narayan is not a committed writer. Narayan’s main purpose is not to deal with any particular movement, principle or ideal but to create artistic beauty with all its complexities and ambiguities.
Irony used by R K Narayan in his works is seldom directed against society or men and manners rather it is full of artistic exuberances. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly observes:

....he (Narayan) 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 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. ¹⁹

In Narayan both irony and humour are inextricably woven together. His ironic stance enables him to look at his fellowmen "with an affectionately ridiculing eye." ²⁰ Narayan’s simple aim is to bring out the ludicrous out of the common happening in a common man’s life. His emphasis is on human relationship in a small town situated in the imagination. He makes his preference clear when he observes:

I value human relationship very much, very intensely. It makes one’s existence worthwhile-human relationship in any and every form, whether at home or outside. I think I have expressed this philosophy in my work successfully. ²¹

This clearly explains Narayan’s stock method of using the comic mode with irony and humour as his basic tools for sustaining the interest of his stories. Used to the simple serene life of a small township, he asks "Why take life too seriously?" ²²

Thus we come to know that Narayan’s approach towards life, the idea of his conviction as a fiction writer and also why he is so different from Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. It seems that in Narayan’s stories there is satire, of course, in varying degrees, only sometimes patently explicit, but often mildly implicit and only feebly noticeable. Narayan is not loud in his intention of correction but this should not be mistaken for the total absence of intention. William Walsh rightly observes: Narayan’s “is an irony of recognition and not an irony of correction.” ²³

Narayan looks at life and into his character alertly as a sympathetic observer. He is well aware of the fact that man is an odd bundle of virtues and vices, angularities and eccentricities. It is this attitude of life that has helped him emerge as an "interpreter of the Indian cultural scene." ²⁴
The most striking feature of Narayan’s use of irony is his unusual wedding of irony with moral imagination making it more subtle. Narayan is content with only portraying the realistic picture of human behavior, its various experiences sweet and sour, rough and sublime. Narayan focuses on the beatific side of human life. The indefatigable persistence and charm of human life finds the most fruitful expression in his short stories. He possesses the gift for portraying the ordinary and the common place, a fine eye for ironic contrast.

Some titles of R.K. Narayan’s stories are ironical. In the short story The Attila the dog Attila is not a “Scourge” but only a commonplace cur. ‘Swami’ in A Hero is not courageous but a coward. In The Father’s Help the help given by Swami’s father is only a hindrance from the son’s point of view. In the story The Comedian who is supposed to provoke laughter succeeds only in bringing tears into the eyes of the audience. The doll in the story Unbreakable Doll is only brittle.

*****

Many of Narayan’s short stories were first published in a leading Madras daily, The Hindu. He also contributed some stories to leading foreign periodicals like The Reporter, The New Yorker, In Vogue and others. The short stories of Narayan belong to the native Indian soil and redolent of its culture. They mainly depict the South Indian life and clearly express his view of the world and those who live in it. Narayan has a wide variety of themes and for our convenience his short stories can be classified as:

1) The Fictional World of Children
2) Social Evil
3) Superstition
4) Ghost Stories
5) Animal Stories
6) Humorous Stories

The Fictional World of Innocent Children

R. K. Narayan in his fictional world of children delves deep into child psychology and portrays children with perfect sympathy and understanding. He depicts his children as angels on earth. He is more sympathetic and compassionate to
children in relation to adults for him any violence done to children is unacceptable. Mohan G. Ramanan observes:

William Golding’s world like Conrad’s is one informed by horror. Narayan has no such sense of the world. If we move beyond Swami we do see evil people and potentially tragic and dark events but in all of Narayan the innocence is affirmed. Narayan’s short stories have several children like Dodu and in his non-fictional pronouncements Narayan occasionally spoke of the child as needing careful nurture but ‘Swami and Friends’ remains Narayan’s extended and sympathetic treatment of the child and of childhood.25

Narayan’s world of children is full of their innocent pranks, gaiety and garrulousness; as a result they bring “the morning freshness of a spring flower”26 to his stories.

As a member of Rajya Sabha, Narayan has expressed his views on child and education. He is of the opinion that the present education system does not allow innocent children to bloom. He is concerned about the burden of the school bag weighing nearly 6 to 8 kilos and impact of this burden on the physical wellbeing of the child. In his maiden speech in the Raja Sabha he called for a ban on school bags, homework and uniforms.

We realize that Narayan is fond of children and it is revealed in his several short stories. With love and understanding Narayan depicts their mirth and mischief and shapes them into living memorable characters. At the same time we come to know his children in general are lovers of freedom. For Narayan, the school with its compulsory ‘dos’, cautionary ‘don’ts’ and punishment is an anathema to children. The school with its suppression and repression and cane driven sense is shown by Narayan as being tyrannical and destructive of children’s freedom. In the short story Uncle the innocent child regards the premises of school as “the danger zone”.

Narayan’s children are unwilling to go to school and Swami in Father’s Help pretends that he has a headache and hopes that “an earthquake would reduce the school building to dust”.27

The portrayal of teacher in Narayan stories is an embodiment of ruthlessness. For children most of their difficulties arise from school and the very thought of school
shudders them. The teachers, it seems, inculcate in the minds of innocent children fear of school rather than love of learning. Hence ‘Ranga’ gives up learning and concludes that education is a useless self-infliction. It is but natural that children love freedom which is denied by the elders. The fact is that full freedom should be given to children to facilitate a proper development of his/her personality. When Ranga is no longer under the control of his father, he enjoys uncontrolled freedom. As Narayan is fond of children, he asserts that children must be protected and cherished. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that education and the child’s well being is an important theme in Narayan’s writing. That’s why in his stories and novels we have innumerable allusions to students, teachers, classrooms, schools, colleges and all the related aspects of pedagogy. It is unwise to assume that Narayan’s frequent references to the cruelty of teachers and unwholesome atmosphere of the school is just to amuse the readers. It is as much to amuse the reader as to awaken him to the reality of the sad state of our educational system which cries for urgent reformation. Even in his prose My Educational Outlook Narayan’s comment on education is noteworthy. He says:

It will be free, it will be joyful, there will be no punishment and there will be no forced drill. Even Sunday is a school day because children like going there.\(^{28}\)

It is clear that Narayan feels that children must be allowed to bloom freely and child should be showered with love, and we the grown-ups should not bother the budding creativity of the innocent children.

Narayan portrays the fictional world of children with their games, anxieties fears, etc. in the story The Regal (Lawley Road and Other Stories). Dodu and his friends are in search of a playground to play cricket. The grownups seem too indifferent to the game. The Regal Clubs, after a long search, get a compound of an old doctor. The description of naughty children’s search for a playground is a masterpiece of narration:

At last Dodu found a man, an old doctor, who was touched by his request and placed his compound at the service of the Regal. Dodu felt so grateful that he invited the other to become a member of the Regal, and exempted him from paying the subscription (four annas a month, defaulting members to pay a fine
of twelve annas)…Dodu undertook to coach him personally if he would join
the Regal.29

Soon the budding cricketers win great laurels; however, the doctor does not
appreciate their victory. At last Swami, his friends and doctor are all thrown out by
the owner of the bungalow. Now the innocent boys do not have a wall against which
they can play. Thus, we see the passive unconcern of adults which is striking contrast
to the enthusiasm of innocent children. In the story Dodu the hero needs some money
to buy a pen-holder which his master is forcing. When his parents fail to help him, he
starts a little business of selling postal stamps and postcards. However, his father tears
the placard down, stamped on it and shouted at Dodu. Dodu is nervous and infers that
he cannot expect help or sympathy from his elders. Then he gets a novel idea from his
brother, writes primer lessons on Palmyra leaves, and presents them to the local
library so that he would earn some money. There the doctor bursts into a hearty laugh
but later on he feels sympathy for Dodu and offers four annas to Dodu. In Narayan’s
world of children, his children seem to be intelligent, witty resourceful except in their
studies. Swami in A Hero shows his unwillingness to go to school on Monday
morning which marks the termination of his playful activities. He feels unhappy when
is asked to study at home in vacation. Instead of dreaming a car, a schoooter or a
bungalow which form the most desired objects of the adult world, Swami’s
consuming passion in life has been to get a simple cycle wheel without spoke or tyre.

The world of children is also the world of fears. The little actors are afraid of
their fathers, teachers, policemen and evil spirits. Swami is always afraid of his father,
his school teacher and even some of his friends. Kutti in The Performing Child is so
afraid of performing before the cinema men that she hides herself into a basket and
risks death by suffocation. On the other hand Narayan’s some little heroes make
themselves the living objects of fear for adults. In Crime and Punishment the little
child exploits his teacher because the latter had slapped him. For his parents the little
boy is a little angel and his parents very often lecture the teacher on how to treat a
child. The teacher is supposed not to punish the child. The boy threatens the teacher
that he will inform his parents about the punishment he received unless the teacher
agreed to postpone his lessons for the day. Then the helpless and poor teacher is
forced to become a Station Master and finally to tell the boy stories of a tiger, Ali
Baba and the Forty Thieves. Once the children realize the weaknesses of their adults,
they become dominant. One function these children serve is to bring humour and fun in Narayan’s short fiction. Their activities provide comic relief and bring pleasantness and vivacity by fun and follies. When the children parade their ignorance as wisdom, they transform the seriousness into pleasantness, relieve the tension and make us pleasantly realize that children after all are children. In Crime and Punishment of Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories the teacher is tense as the pampered boy cries, so he tries to quiet the child—“You must not cry for these trifling matters, you must be like a soldier….” And the little child in reply says—“A soldier will shoot with a gun if he is hit.”

The witty answer must lighten the tension momentarily even if it is reintroduced by the successive activities of the child. R. K. Narayan brings out the simplicity and innocence of children in contrast to the greed and materialism of the adults in the significant story The Performing Child from the anthology Lawley Road and Other Stories. ‘Kutti’ a little girl is a talented singer and dancer. She is extremely happy in her world full of toys and chocolates. Two persons connected with the film happen to see the performance of Kutti and invite her to dance in the film. The poor parents get opportunity to amass wealth out of her talent. However, Kutti does not understand her father’s materialism or the sanctity of art; she hides herself in a linen basket in ante-room to avoid the film people. Thus the story throws light on the materialism of the adults.

Again in Leela’s Friend (Lawley Road and Other Stories) the author highlights the relentless, unforgiving nature of the grown-ups in contrast to child’s innocence. The newly appointed servant Sidda brings joy in the life of little Leela by playing with her every now and then. His company makes her supremely happy. He becomes her close friend. Sidda is given two meals and four rupees a month, in return for which he washes clothes, tends the garden and chops wood. Narayan here draws our attention to the fact the work extracted from Sidda is not in proportion to the meagre pay he is given. In the world of children there is no caste or class discrimination. That’s why Leela asks awkward questions to her mother.

‘Why should not Sidda sit in our chair, Mother?’ “Why should he (Sidda) always be made to sleep outside the house, Mother?” Mother did not answer
the question. Leela said a moment later, Sidda is gone because he wouldn’t be allowed to sleep inside the house just as we do.31

Unfortunately, Sidda is accused of stealing the golden chain of Leela and put behind the bar. In fact, Leela had playfully kept the golden chain in the tamarind pot. For which the guiltless Sidda has been harassed. The parents are delighted to regain their chain which they thought it had been stolen by Sidda. They do not feel guilty for holding Sidda responsible for the temporary loss of the chain. The unforgiving nature of the parents is highlighted by the author. The father who is so quick to inform the police of Sidda’s supposed theft, coolly says that he would inform the police of the recovery of the chain the following day. On the contrary, we also note Leela’s love for Sidda. Her pathetic entreaties to keep Sidda back is a contrast to the anxiety of the parents to get rid of him.

Mohan Ramanan, aptly points out: “Siddha’s misfortune, the innocence of the child and adult prejudice are brought out to advantage in ‘Leela’s Friend’. Here we see Narayan’s broad human sympathies.32

In Unbreakable Doll anthologized in Malgudi Days the author narrates the story of a child and her father. Leela the central character compels her father to buy doll which she calls ‘Dochi’. At the same time, the father also purchases a suitcase. On their way back to home the ‘dochi’ gets broken to pieces. Even the suitcase has also been lost. The father loses his temper and scolds her for carelessness. Leela wailing to get back the ‘dochi’ is a contrast to the mute misery of the father. The father is not in a position to understand that a doll for Leela is as much a necessity as a suitcase is to him. He never realizes his mistake that he is also equally responsible for the loss of the articles thereby Narayan mildly pinpoints the folly of the calculative grown-ups. Similarly, in Wife’s Holiday of Malgudi Days Kannan, the gambler in the absence of his son and wife breaks open the tin box in which the little child has stored his money. Kannan being a gambler loses the money of his little son and eventually cuts a sorry figure before his son and wife who place implicit trust in him. Thus in Narayan’s children stories we often find paternal love in constant refrain. Kali, the central character in Sweets for Angels (Lawley Road and Other Stories) has a great affection for the children.
The children were unaware that there was man (Kali) fervently worshipping them as he, sometimes, softly walked behind them, and stood at the school gate, staring far into it. The hum emanating from that yellow building was as music to his ears. It filled him with a mystic joy.\(^{33}\)

For Kali the little children are angels. Out of his love for children he distributes the sweets among them. Unfortunately, the bearded man Kali is beaten by the people considering him to be a kidnapper. It is an excellent story of moving pathos and irony.

In **The Hungry Child**, Narayan focuses on the bondage between children and parents, even though the parents happen to be careless and rude. It is clear that Narayan delves deep into child psychology and portray children with perfect sympathy and understanding.

For such a lively portrayal of children, one would suspect that R. K. Narayan might have studied child psychology. Narayan on the contrary, considers psychology a device not to understand children but to get away from their noisy company. He therefore dismisses the child psychology as an atrocious idea, as the escapist’s view and prefers to deal with them as human realities and not as abstractions, problems, bundles of psychological activities or projects.\(^{34}\)

Narayan’s fictional world is full of fun, humour and his young actors provide comic relief to the readers, relieve tension and make us pleasantly realize that the children are innocent. Their activities “adventures are in some respects of any school boy, East or West: the eternal hostility of school masters, the vagaries of parents, and the rivalry of cricket, the pain of growing up”.\(^{35}\)

In India it is a disgrace to fail in the examination and some of the students get frustrated and commit suicide. Narayan in his stories portrays the pain and misery of young students who suffer mental agonies when they cannot pass an exam. **Iswaran** from **Malgudi Days** drowns himself in the river Sarayu when he fails the intermediate examination for the tenth time. He feels that his life is meaningless. Even he has no courage to see his results. He says:
O God …if I can’t pass an examination even with a tenth attempt, what is the use of my living and disgracing the world?36

Iswaran is a psychological study of the behavior of a diffident boy who is mocked by others. Whether the death of Iswaran is an act of suicide or an accidental death due to frenzy of exuberance is something very difficult for us to say. But it is obvious that Narayan is against suicide. He indirectly suggests that suicide is not the remedy to overcome the problems. Again in the story Breach of Promise the protagonist takes decision to commit suicide in case he does not pass an examination. Thus, Narayan in his stories highlights the plight of the young learners in Indian schools and colleges. Even today we come across young suicide when they fail examination which is a sorry state of affairs.

Thus, one of the most significant contributions of R. K. Narayan is his portrayal of children. Undoubtedly he is good in depicting children; for they are the innocent species devoid of all complexities of life. Not only in short stories but in his novels also we hear the playing, giggling, mischief making children. Balu in The Financial Career, Rajam Swami Soma, Mani, Shankar and Samuel in Swami and Friends Babu in ‘The Man-Eater of Malgudi - These children win our hearts as we see ourselves nostalgically in their mischief. Narayan with his characteristic empathy puts himself into their personalities, understands them fully, and delineates them exquisitely.

Thus Narayan recreates the fictional world of childhood superbly and his genial humour makes his stories utterly charming and readable.

The World of Social Evils

In Narayan’s short stories and novels the theme of social evils such as greed, poverty, dowry system, class and caste system, black-marketing, starvation, etc. find a place. It is observed that Narayan deals with social evils indirectly but implicitly narrates the plight of the society. At the same time he does not suggest solutions to social evils:
He is concerned neither with the exposure of the various drawbacks of society nor with highlighting the cause of the downtrodden and the ‘haves not’, nor with the portrayal of spiritualism and inner conflicts; he, like a true artist, is content with only portraying the realistic picture of human behaviour, its various experiences—sweet and sour, rough and sublime. He is happy to be detached.  

Entertainment and readability are the key-note of Narayan’s stories. He resists moralizing which is the bane of many a good fiction writer like Anand and Raja Rao. In the words of B. Vyaghreswarudu:

Narayan approaches the Indian scene with no serious angle of study. Unlike Anand and Raja Rao, he is neither a committed writer nor a spiritualist. His delicate mixture of gentle irony and humour, warmth and sympathy, quiet realism and fantasy keep him poles apart from Anand’s militant humanism and robust earthiness.

It seems that R.K. Narayan is not a committed writer in the same way as Mulk Raj Anand is. This does not mean that he works in a total vacuum. If we study his stories carefully, we come to know that Narayan is an ironist who strays into satire whenever the occasion demands. He merely pictures the society with mild dose of instruction. He has his own way of dealing with the problems of society and he is content with mild criticism. Narayan, with a sense of detachment, allows the things to happen in their way. Nowhere he seems to be writing with an idea in his mind to rectify the situation or the society or the world. In fact, this type of realization and attitude helped him form a balanced view of life and situations.

Another Community from Under The Banyan Tree and Other Stories is strong with a serious purpose. Narayan being a keen and sympathetic observer of life around him gives us picture of the communal situation in certain parts of the country soon after the partition in 1947. It reveals Narayan’s hatred of communal riots.

The story highlights how dangerous rumor-mongering and distrust can be in times of communal disturbance. Another Community is a moving story of a martyr at the blood of communal blood-bath. Narayan’s protagonist falls victim to the
communal frenzy, is nameless and does not even provide the information about the community he belongs. Instead, he asks reader:

I want you to find out if you like to what community or section he belonged, I’m sure you will not be able to guess it any more than you will be able to say what make of vest he wore under his shirt, and it will be just as immaterial to our purpose.39

Narayan criticizes blind fanaticism and indiscriminate brutality and at the same time his love for peace and humanity is seen when he asserts: “There is no such thing as your community or mine. We are all of this country, I and my wife and children, you and your wife and children…Let us not cut each other’s throats.”40

At the same time Narayan warns us not to rush into action in blind haste and exposes the gross senseless behind communal riots. India is a democratic country and there should not be caste or class discrimination and there should not be exploitation of any citizen. However, in some parts our country, the caste feeling is deeply ingrained. Fellow feeling is most essential for the peace and prosperity of our country. The story Fellow-Feeling anthologized in Malgudi Days and An Astrologers Day and Other Stories highlight a total lack of fellow-feeling. Rajam Iyer and the new comer belong to two different castes and the later mistaking the interference to be a gesture of Brahmin superiority. Mohan G. Ramanan writes:

In an early story like Fellow Feeling Narayan evokes the atmosphere of the Thirties and Forties in Madras when the non-Brahmin movement under Periyar Ramaswami Naikar was at a particularly intense phase… That Narayan makes the Brahmin come on top does not necessarily mean that he is showing caste superiority, only that he is being true to his perception of a particular incident. In many other places Narayan makes fun of Brahminical foibles and hypocrisy.41

In this typical short story, Narayan talks about ‘fellow-feeling’ ironically. As a well-wisher of the society, R. K. Narayan in fact earnestly longs for peace and prosperity in our society. He narrates the story in such a way that the reader laughs at
their follies and at the same time realize meaninglessness of caste system and hatred in our community.

Narayan in some of his stories deals with the theme of hunger, poverty and human degradation. His Malgudi world has neither princes nor warriors. His heroes are poor common men. The Martyr’s Corner anthologized in Lawley Road and Other Stories illustrates Narayan’s two cardinal qualities as a writer—his humanity and gentle irony. Rama, the protagonist is ‘the prince’ among wayside caterers who owns a portable stall which he sets up every day at a corner near a cinema house. The business is good and husband and wife live in a perfect harmony. He has a steady client but one day there is a riot and a person is killed at the spot where he sets his stall. The spot is declared holy ground and Rama is pushed out as a memorial is erected to the dead man. Rama is forced to wind up his business and becomes a waiter in Restaurant Kohinoor. There he finds comfort in recalling that he was once a hotel-owner himself.42

The real martyr is Rama, the poor kindly vendor who lost his business and not the person who was killed in the riot. Narayan depicts the plight of poor people who are denied even the basic necessities of life. The comment of Perry Westbrook is significant:

What sort of people are they? What can life mean to them? The Martyr’s corner contains at least the beginnings of answers to these questions.43

The sense of security, the vital necessity of every human being, seems to be absent in a disorganized society. The wretched economic condition of the downtrodden people is movingly described in the story End of Troubles (Malgudi Days) The pathetic story describes the tragic death of Kuppan, a poor riksha puller, in his attempt to reach his old patron whom he sees getting down from the bus. Kuppan, meets an accident and is run over by the bus. Half-A-Rupee Worth from Lawley Road and Other Stories throws light on the miseries of the poor people caused by the hoarders and black-marketers. The poor people cannot afford to pay for rice owing to the mounting price. Narayan in his world of Malgudi enables readers to get a glimpse into the mind of a greedy man through Subbiah, the central, character in Half-A-Rupee Worth. Subbiah’s gross materialism, his greed for money, his
selfishness and hypocrisy is exposed by Narayan. Everything in excessive manner becomes poisonous.

In Narayan’s own words:

Making money after some point has no meaning. Doctors say don’t eat sugar, don’t eat this or that and they die of cholesterol. I agree with you. This is the plight of the intelligentsia and their values of life. This is the case everywhere.44

Excessive lust for wealth leads Subbiah to his ruin. Every now and then he only thinks of profit. “Rice was in his blood.”45

As there is a shortage of food grains, the government exercises control on food supply to help the poor. Subbiah by greasing the palm of authorities manages to keep rice “out of sight and out of paper” 46 in his godown.

To gain more profit he sells rice at an exorbitant price though people earnestly request him to sell them one seer of rice, his heart is not melted. He lives and dies with rice. The selfish rice merchant thus meets his doom in his own overstocked godown where the rice bags topple down on him and kill him. It is an irony that the rice so eagerly hoarded becomes Subbiah’s death trap. Narayan draws the attention of readers to Subbiah’s shallow religiosity and selfishness in these words:

God arranges everything for the best. He (Subbiah) distributed a few annas for charity twice a week and broke a coconut at the temple on Fridays in appreciation of God’s interest in his affairs.47

It is ironical that subbiah not only bribes government auditors but also Gods. As in other stories, poetic justice is meted out to Subbiah. It is said that for a hungry man food is God. To satisfy his/ her hunger he/she can do anything. Four Rupees anthologized in Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories is Narayan’s moving tale of a very poor man named Ranga. Though Ranga is not a good trainer and swimmer, he ventures to drown to recover a treasured brass vessel from 60 feet well only for four rupees. “He had never earned four rupees in a lump, and that was attractive.”48
Narayan has a lot of sympathy for these poor people. Murugan of *The Broken Pot* and Muni of *A Horse and Two Goats* lead miserable lives who are unable to satisfy their basic needs due to poverty. Similarly, we have snake charmers, beggars, pickpockets, labourers, servants. Narayan’s poor people in his fictional world believe that everything is pre-ordained. The portrayal of poor people seems to be authentic and also they are intensely individual. Poverty is seen but not abhorred by R. K. Narayan in his fictional world.

Gambling, unemployment and alcoholism affect adversely in the lives of people. Rama Rao in the story *Out of Business* (Astrologer’s Day and Other Stories) loses his job and comes in great trouble. Frustrated and unemployed protagonist invests his little money in solving crossword puzzles from the journal ‘The Captain’ which offered every week a first prize of 4000 rupees. Unfortunately, he loses his money in this gambling. Out of losses, disappointments and frustrations at the end, Rama Rao decides to commit suicide by lying down on the rail track, however; the train is late and Rama Rao gets sufficient time for self-examination and returns home where he comes to know that his economical problems are solved. His wife informs him that their tenant is ready to offer good cash for their house. When asked whether Ram Rao would invest money in future, he replies with great emphasis, “No, no, never again.”

Narayan vividly pictures the miserable condition of the unemployed people and how these unemployed people turn to gambling and drinking. Thus Narayan points out the harmful effects of gambling on the family environs. There are some people in our society who fall prey to their addiction to gambling; In *Wife’s Holiday* (Malgudi Days) the gambler Kanan celebrates his wife’s absence. As he has no money for gambling, he being a slave to gambling steals his own little son’s money and goes to Mantapam to play the game of dice. Narayan aptly describes-

> At Mantapam luck deserted him, or rather never came near him; within a short time he lost all his money.

Kanan returns home where he sees his wife and little son who have unexpectedly returned home. He looks at his wife and son in a sort of dull panic. His situation is hopeless and resigns himself to face an oncoming storm. Thus the story reveals the evil effects of gambling. It seems that only the weak-minded and
unscrupulous yield to gambling and drinking and destroys the happiness of the members of family. It is painful when we read how Kanan, the father shamelessly steals his son’s savings for gambling. The Evening Gift from Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories is Narayan’s excellent story that depicts the tragic condition of the poor and helpless Shankar. Unwillingly, he accepts the job of looking after a drunkard for thirty rupees a month. His duty is to check wealthy drunkards drink after nine in the evening and take him home safely. Meantime, he receives a letter from home and he is asked to send them hundred rupees immediately otherwise they would lose their house, his last “possession in this world”.

Shankar curses his lot for being the eldest son of a troubled family. As usual he accompanies his employer to the Oriental Café Bar where his employer in drunken state is not ready to go back home even though the clock strikes nine. Shankar urges him to finish his drink but the wealthy obstinate drunkard is unmoved and then in a fit anger dismisses him by offering him four month salary. This is Shankar’s ‘evening gift’ but unfortunately he loses it soon. The next day he decides to go back to his village but the police inspector arrests him. He is accused of exploiting his rich employer when he was in drunken state and injuring him. As a matter of fact poor Shankar has not cheated his employer but there is none to listen to him. The poor, the helpless, the downtrodden people like Shankar are punished in our country for the crime they have not committed. True, the law takes its own course, but it is bitter truth that sometimes the weak and the poor suffer. Shankar goes back to ‘his village and back to all the ancient never ending troubles of his family life’.

This is the tragic story of Shankar and Narayan highlights the evil effects of wine on the family and society.

Greed for wealth is another evil which is prevalent in every society. There are certain people who are indulged in worshipping money. They can do anything for money. Generally Narayan seems to have sympathy for the servants. However, the author also points out treacherous nature of servant named Rama in the story A Career from Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories. He gets a job of a servant in the shop of a ‘Talkative Man’ because of his humble nature and smartness. He wins the heart of everyone, remains in the house of the Talkative Man for five years. The business of Talkative Man increases tenfold and he earns a large profit because of
Rama. But when the master is away from his shop and home, Rama who is motivated by the philosophy ‘Get rich-quick’ robs his employer’s shop and leaves the people forever. As a result, the Talkative Man becomes bankrupt and comes in a great trouble. In this story Rama the fraud and cheat is punished at the end as his eyesight is lost due to the attack of small-pox. He is seen as a beggar by the talkative man at the Tirupathi Hills. The Talkative Man realizes the voice of Rama and feels the greatest kindness for him and then offers him a rupee. Here we come to know the utter treachery of the servant and kind hearted and sympathetic nature of the master till the end. It is irony of fate that Rama ultimately being reduced to begging, seeks alms from none other than his employer he had cheated.

So far moral ethos is concerned in Narayan’s short stories; it is deep and all pervasive. His animals rank higher in the scale of moral values. On the other hand, human beings seem to be selfish and self-centered.

In the story The Blind Dog of Malgudi Days Narayan depicts man’s greed for money, his materialistic attitude as against dog’s faithfulness, loyalty and selfless love. When the blind man’s wife dies, it is the dog that helps him to earn money. By trying the ribbon cord around the dog’s neck the blind man follows it and earns his livelihood. The dog has to stay on forever at the end of the string. Time passes. The blind man earns more money but his behaviour towards the animal is harsh. Narayan writes:

He (Blind man) gave a tug when he wanted the dog to stop, and shouted like a bullock-driver when he wanted him to move on...Don’t whine, you rascal. “Don’t I give you food, you want to loaf, do you?”…swore the blind man.\(^53\)

The ribbon-vendor feels pity for the dog and he cuts the cord and let lose the dog. The animal gets its freedom but everybody is surprised when the dog returns to its master after a few days. Though the faithful dog is back in the service of the blind man, he says “I gave him a blow which he will never forget again”\(^54\)

R.K. Narayan draws our attention to the fact that man is selfish and cannot understand selfless love and loyalty of the dog. The dog seems to be ‘blind’ in willfully choosing its own doom. In this regard the remark of the ribbon seller is
noteworthy, “What can we do with a creature who returns to his doom with such a free heart?” The Broken Pot anthologized in Dodu and Other Stories is a touching tale of poverty. Murugan gets involved in some intricate transaction affecting other people’s money. As a result the people in the village ostracize him and he begins to starve. His brother feels sympathy for Murugan so he offers him some rice. However, his brother’s wife does not like her husband’s benevolence. In fury she dashes the pot with boiling rice to pieces. Murugan, and his wife lose interest in life and they commit suicide. His brother thinks that his wife is responsible for Murugan’s tragedy so he kills her at once. At the root of misery is poverty. At the same time Narayan points out that even the harmony of human relationships is acutely disturbed due to poverty and ‘death’ seems to be the solution to the problem.

The system of dowry is another social evil which is deeply rooted in our society. Narayan in his short stories highlights the predicament of women in the marriage market. In the name of dowry bride’s family is harassed and tortured. The author highlights the tension and financial strain in The Gold Belt from Malgudi Days. The Gold Belt reference is made to the wicked and cruel system of dowry which ruins the life of many a Hindu girl.

Sambasivan, the father of the bride Sharda arranges his marriage and raises loans from all possible sources, mortgages his property. On the occasion of Sharda’s marriage the bridal party demands the bride to be decked in a golden belt. If their demand in not fulfilled, the engagement would be cancelled. Sharda’s poor father is threatened and he comes in a great difficulty. However, Shastri comes forward and arranges for the gold belt and saves the marriage from cancellation. Ironically enough the bridegroom privately promises Sharda to send the money of the belt. The title of the story is apt for the gold belt seems to be the deciding factor in bride’s life. Again in The White Flower we see mild satire on the Hindu system of marriage. It is believed that the union of two hearts depends upon the wishes of other people more than the wishes of the two persons directly concerned. The two astrologers supporting the side of the young boy and the girl do not agree so far as the validity of the two horoscopes is concerned. The matter is therefore referred to the priest of the temple who places two flowers white one for ‘yes’ and the red one for ‘no’ before the idol of Hanuman. Then the girl aged five is asked to pick up one of them. On the whole, it seems that Narayan is well aware of the fact that the mere picturing of the society
with a mild dose of instruction is enough to drive home certain truths. After all the aim of satire is not the degradation of man. Narayan in his stories tries to show men the ways in which he has degraded himself.

Superstition

Belief in mysterious myths and silly superstitions is in the Indian blood and Narayan makes the best use of this aspect of Indian life, a theme fraught with rich potentialities for fictional treatment in his short stories. Superstitions are the product of darkness and ignorance and arise out of fear and insecurity. It is said that practice of superstitions arise out of certain social, economic and religions doctrines. In Encyclopedia Britannica (Volume 21, Page 577) superstition is defined as “the acceptance of beliefs or practices groundless in themselves and inconsistent with the degree of enlightenment reached by the community to which one belongs”. Superstition is an irrational belief, a way of explaining the fearful, the unknown or the mysterious. Also it is the religion of the feeble mind and we should note that it has caused a severe set-back in the progress of nation. Superstitions are universal, but India with its age old customs and traditions abound in them.

Indian people are superstitions by nature and Narayan being a keen observer knows very well the strong hold of superstitions on the minds of the Indian people. Narayan himself is a product of a society where such faith and superstitions loom large. It is observed that in some of his stories Narayan does not explicitly announce his distrust in superstitions while it is also obvious that he has criticized fake astrologers in his stories. So we can say that in his stories Narayan assumes a dubious stance, his attitude towards the issue remains ambivalent.

In the story An Astrologer’s Day anthologized in Malgudi Days Narayan satirizes the fake astrologer and credulous masses. It seems that as long as the people are gullible, the deceivers will continue to thrive. The character of astrologer is memorable and Narayan makes fun of him in these words:

He (Astrologer) was as much stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that
was mere matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question 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.\textsuperscript{56}

Narayan delineates the character of astrologer quite vividly and it provides a glimpse into a typical Indian street life. But the attention of the reader is gripped immediately when the customer named Guru Nayak challenges the astrologer to answer his questions. Ironically enough this bogus astrologer could answer all his questions because this customer was the man whom the astrologer had tried to kill some years ago. At the same time we empathize with the astrologer when he reveals to his wife that he is not a murderer and the anxiety of guilt has been lifted. It is certain that the mask of astrologer has enabled him to escape from the jaws of death. The ending of the story \textit{An Astrologer Day} seems to be like O. Henry. M.K. Naik’s observation may be quoted-

The endings of Narayan’s short stories show a strong influence of O. Henry’s celebrated technique of the trick finale. All the stories in which irony either-comic or tragic-plays a shaping role naturally have a surprise ending…The twist at the end is normally a single one as in \textit{An Astrologer’s Day}.\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{An Astrologer’s Day} is a typical Indian tale but its appeal is universal. It is an Indian in tone and setting, yet the ending imparts to it a universal significance. Narayan is well aware of two types of astrologers or \textit{sanyasis}. He has defined them in his ‘Introduction to the novel \textit{A Tiger of Malgudi}. ‘A Sanyasi is one, who renounces everything and undergoes a complete change of personality…there are also fake who adopt this life for its sheer vagrancy, or to exploit the public in the garb of the holy man’.\textsuperscript{58}

The society at large presented in Malgudi is traditional and superstitious. Most of the characters are innocent and they believe that everything in the universe is pre-ordained. They seem to be helpless creatures tossed this way or that by the caprice of future. They depend upon the chance or luck for their happiness.
In the story **All Avoidable Talk** in *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, Shastri’s friend suggests him to avoid all quarrels for the planets are against him. Shastri blindly follows his friend and suffers a lot. Though Shastri’s friend is not a professional, he gives free prophecies and people believe him. The astrologers pretend that they are “Mr. Know All” and exploit innocent people for their benefit. These people are put under perpetual dread of some impending doom all through their lives. Narayan criticizes superstitious people who spend a lot of money on rituals.

People are also foolish and superstitious enough to conduct *homas* and the like and put money, *sarees* in the fire…Some criminal lawyer who gets 10,000 rupees a month does some *homa* and others follow him.\(^{59}\)

In **The Antidote** R.K. Narayan criticizes the blind belief of people in astrology, the film actor, Gopal says:

Astrologers have often told me that I might not see this birthday…we held some propitiatory rites at home for planets…My astrologer has suggested that I do nothing unpleasant today.\(^{60}\)

The absurdity of staunch belief in astrology is depicted in the story **The Antidote**. Gopal who believes in planets, stars and astrology is forced to play the death-scene on his 49\(^{th}\) birthday by his film director. He finds an antidote or a remedy to get rid of the evil effect of the scene. He opens an eye and winks at the camera. He believes that it would undo the effect of death-scene. The story is humorous and the title is apt and befitting to the attitude of Gopal. Thus Narayan points out the average Indian belief in superstition, stars, horoscopes and astrology.

It is observed that pious Hindu parents visit temple, pray gods for a boon to have a male child and offer son’s hair, gold or goats to God. In **Nitya** in *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* Narayan presents a fine story based on the principle of generation gap. The story depicts the sentiments and pious feelings of the old parents and recklessness and atheistic temperament of Nitya, a representation of modern generation, while the old generation respects and wishes to cling to certain custom and values, the young generation pooh-poohs them. In **The Missing Mail** death is interpreted as inauspicious. Thanappa, the postman withholds a telegram concerning a death so as not to spoil a wedding. One should note that in the stories
dealing with astrology, Narayan condemns not the science of astrology but fake astrologers. Even in modern age man is not free from superstitions beliefs. The fear of god leads man to perform some rituals to please him. In the story A Snake in the Grass anthologized in Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories a cobra enters the compound and the people give up the idea of killing it because they think that it is the visit of God Subramaya. The mother believes that the snake’s visit is the reminder of her promised Abhishekam. In this way Narayan makes fun of superstitious people.

The Snake Song deals with the power of music, its influence on the snake and the belief in the curse of Sadhu. The Talkative Man while playing on his flute late at night is interrupted by a Sadhu who requests for some edible. He insults the Sadhu and makes use of harsh words. Even Sadhu is not allowed to enjoy the music and is driven out. He in turn curses that the narrator will never be able to play his flute. After a while, there appears a cobra that forces him to play Punnaga Varali the whole night. The narrator is transfixed. Whenever the narrator attempts to change the tune, the cobra shows its violent reaction. Nobody is there to help him. At the end, the narrator falls prostate before the cobra and becomes unconscious. The following day his master advises the narrator to give up his music otherwise the same cobra will disturb him again. Here Mohan G. Ramanan’s comment is noteworthy:

The Snake Song is a very brief story but its intensity rests on its manipulation of what is a common belief in India, particularly South India, of the capacity of the Raga Punnaga Varali to affect a cobra. The story also is a variant of a motif in Indian mythology of pride and its fall, of cursing wrong doers and of curses being lifted after due repentance.  

The vice of the musician is pride for which he is punished and Narayan thus maintains the poetic justice. Also the author points out certain basic values and his commitment to them is significant. Kind words cost nothing seems to be the message of the story.

In Hindu families the astrologers are very often consulted with regard to marriage. If the horoscopes of bride and bridegroom do not match, the marriages are not settled—almost every match is subject to the approval of an astrologer. Narayan in The White Flower narrates the helplessness of superstitious and religious people before the astrologers and god and highlights the absurdity of it and at the same time
reveals his sense of commitment. Krishna and a young girl are in love with each other and want to marry but the astrologer of girl’s father tells that there is a serious flaw in Krishna’s horoscope. According to the astrologer, Krishna has Mars in the Seventh House which indicates a short span of life for the bride. He further maintains that even it is dangerous to keep two horoscopes together in the same envelope. Bridegroom’s father has no faith in horoscopes, yet he consults a great astrologer who comes out with ‘a counter attack’, “The wife killing Planet was a spent force now”.  

Here Narayan aptly points out the discrepancy in the reading of horoscopes by two astrologers. As there is a dilemma, they arrange the flower test before the image of Hanuman, the God of power and decide the matter. An appeal is made to God by picking either a white or red flower. ‘White flower’ means godly approval and ‘red’ means disapproval. The test is not decided in favour of Krishna. Such tests are arranged even today in many temples in India. Narayan criticizes the superstitious nature of the people in these words when Krishna is impatient to get married:

….Krishna fervently prayed to God to give the decision in his favour and to make Mars as impotent as a piece of straw and to put enough sense in people’s heads to make them see that it was impotent.  

The story is an eye opener and Narayan’s commitment seems to be clear here. There is an element of autobiography in the stories like The White Flower and Seventh House which are “based on Narayan’s own struggles with the astrological configurations which discouraged his marriage”.  

The story Seventh House in A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories is a continuation of The White Flower. Krishna, the protagonist is passionately in love with a girl but their horoscopes do not match. However, he marries his sweet heart despite all opposition. Time passes. His wife falls ill and her condition seems to be serious. So Astrologer is consulted and ‘Mars’ in the Seventh House is remembered. Out of fear and helplessness rituals are performed. Krishna is advised to visit prostitute so that his wife would be survived. Krishna’s loyalty to his wife, his deep love for her is noteworthy. He is an embodiment of love and we realize Narayan’s staunch traditionalism through Krishna’s practice of monogamy. Astrologer is supposed to interpret the divine designs, however, his advice to Krishna to astray seems to be absurd, and that is what Narayan points out here in this story. Krishna’s
love for his wife, his loyalty is highlighted in this story. Thus Seventh House is a touching tale of marital love and fidelity.

**Ghost Stories**

Beliefs and superstitions are part of Indian culture. There was a time when ghosts, devils, evil spirits and evil eyes had got sanction in the society but nowadays they are treated as superstitions. Even in modern India there are some people who believe in ghosts, devils, etc. But the India in which R.K. Narayan was brought up was rampant with such beliefs. So it is but natural that supernatural beings figure in the early novels and short stories of Narayan. Narayan is well aware of mysteries prevalent in his fictional town. In fact the form of the story itself is accommodative of mystery, suspense and unexplainable secrets. In his stories Narayan creates a sense of the eerie to be felt naturally. His ghost stories are narrated humorously; they are horror tales with a difference. Narayan’s eerie stories have a supernatural basis, but, it is to be taken into account that they are humorous. Moreover, most of the ghost stories are narrated by The Talkative Man.

In **Old Man of the Temple** (Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories) The Talkative Man narrates the event while he was returning from Kumbum in a hired taxi. The taxi driver named Doss suddenly stops the car near a ruined temple and there a ghost enters his body. He calls himself Krishna Battar and tells the Talkative Man that he is eighty years old. Even he does not know how to drive the modern chariot i.e. car. Further he provides information about his glorious past—how the king Vishnu Sharma visited his temple for the Annual Festival but nowadays nobody cares. He had a wife named Seetha. He was knifed by the robbers. But, somehow he managed to return to the temple and since then he has been there. The Talkative Man urges him to join his wife who is dead. Accordingly the ghost in the body of driver disappears and Doss comes to his senses. Thus Narayan shows his penchant and surprise in the story. The significant aspect of the story is The Talkative Man’s guiding the ghost to the land of the dead. At the same time, Narayan’s love for the grotesque and bizarre seems to be humorous.
Again in the story **Old Bones** the ghost enters the body of the Talkative Man’s nephew’s body in a deserted dak bungalow. The caretaker of the building is an old man who talks about the mysterious nature of the dak bungalow. The eerie atmosphere is created with the rattling and battering of the shutters. The ghost in the body of the narrator’s nephew asks him to dig up the bones that lie buried under a heap and throw them into a well. The wish of the ghost is that his bones should not be defiled. Further, the ghost provides information about his murder. The caretaker had killed Murugesan (ghost) for the sake of money. The Talkative man’s nephew comes to normalcy the following day when he mentions the name of Murugesan; the caretaker realizes that he would come in trouble if the narrator informs the police about the event, so he requests the narrator not to do so. After all, the truth comes out by supernatural revelation. Here we are reminded of Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ in which the ghost of Hamlet’s father informs him about his murder by his own brother.

Supernatural beings also figure in the early novels of Narayan. In **Swami and Friends** when the hero is caught in the forest after disappearing from his school, he gets an experience of ghost or devil at night. Even in modern times people often talk about certain places where accidents occur frequently. Such places, people believe, are ruled by ghosts or evil spirits. This is well illustrated in the stories like **The Level Crossing** and **An Accident**.

In **The Level Crossing** the child is lost and its mother, out of grief, turns insane and dies. Since then a large number of deaths have occurred on the day of child’s death. The spot is supposed to be mysterious and inauspicious. The ex-gatekeeper’s children get crushed under the train despite the care he had taken. His wife cannot bear the grief so she also dies of shock. At the time of night, the ex-gatekeeper commune with his dead wife and children at the level crossing and is also able to see the spirit of the mad woman.

It is believed that a man who dies an unnatural and untimely death or commits suicide is sure to become an evil spirit and trouble others. Like human beings ghosts are also of good and bad nature. Good ones never harm people while those of bad nature are always in search of occasions to trouble people. In the story **An Accident** a driver, Arul Doss dies in the accident in the hill base where the narrator’s car breaks down. As it is the time of night and nobody is there to help him, the narrator is about
to abandon the car. To our surprise, there comes a driver named Arul Doss who repairs the car in the pitch dark and also informs the narrator that the driver named Arul Doss met with an accident some time back because of the evil nature of the place, further, he requests the narrator to explain the master that Arul Doss was not drunk while driving the car when the accident occurred. The next day when the narrator meets the master, he is sure that Arul Doss was drunk when he met with an accident. The readers are wondered whether the ghost of Arul Doss came to rescue the narrator and repaired the car at the time of night or some other person helped him. Narayan creates suspense and arouses the curiosity of the readers. It is mysterious that the ghost of Arul Doss is restless and wants to wipe away the bad impression left behind on the master’s mind. The ghost in Narayan’s story seems to be good one and he comes to the rescue of the narrator.

**Neighbour’s Help** is an excellent short story about two friends. The Talkative Man and his close friend Ekambaram were very close to each other. Unfortunately, Ekambaram dies and before he takes his last breath, he requests the Talkative Man to look after his children and hands over him ornaments and some papers. But he does not keep his word and also decides not to allow silly sentimentality upset his finance. The greed overpowers him and he exploits his friend’s children. It is at this time, the ghost of Ekambaram appears and mends The Talkative Man’s ways so that his children will not be exploited and troubled. Here in this story, the ghost acts as a good human being. The eerie atmosphere created by Narayan is apt and the author highlights man’s greed for money and gross materialism. At the same time, poetic justice is maintained by punishing the narrator who suffers a loss of 1500 rupees. **Neighbour’s Help** is not only the supernatural tale but it deals with some basic human sympathy. It is to be noted that Narayan’s ghost or evil spirit is not bad one but acts as guardian angel. In conclusion, we can say that Narayan’s ghost stories are dominated by the impulse to bridge the gulf between life and after life and his focus is on sheer entertainment of his readers.

**Old Man of The Temple, An Accident** and **Old Bones** are supernatural or mysterious stories but it is clear that instead of becoming horror tales, these remain amusing and humorous stories of pure entertainment. The remark of Trivedi and Soni about Narayan’s ghost stories is significant:
Narayan’s handling of the supernatural creates the proper atmosphere. His ghost stories deserve admiration for their appropriate atmosphere, telling phrases and vivid descriptions. When we read them there is a willing suspension of disbelief. **Narayan has humanized the ghosts so they listen to reason, argue and cause no harm.**

Animal Stories

R.K. Narayan’s animal stories demonstrate his love of animals. It is revealed in his *My Days* and stories dealing with animals. Narayan had all kinds of pets even a monkey called Rama, who is present in the short story *Naga*. *The Blind ‘Dog’*, *The Mute Companion*, *At the Portal*, *Attila*, *Chippy*, etc. are delightful animal stories. Indeed, it is remarkable how Narayan understands animals and makes them almost living character. Murli Das Melwani writes:

In the case of the animal stories, the animals are substituted for human beings. The backdrop remains the same, only the performers change. Some of the seriousness surrounding adult human lift is thus shorn away, its prejudices exposed, and satire and irony suggested.

*The Blind Dog* is a poignant tale of an unending devotion of a little dog towards a blind beggar. The reader is moved to see when the faithful dog and the painful sacrifice of his losing freedom. The dog returns to his master (blind beggar) even though he was set free. The dog helps the blind beggar to beg and earn his livelihood but he ill-treats the dog. Narayan emphasizes the fact that animals are loyal and faithful than the human beings who are selfish and materialistic. In this connection Jack Beatty’s remark is noteworthy:

It is all very strange, uncertain and moving. Loyalty in Malgudi has nothing to do with the particular qualities of persons. It is not inspired or elicited. It is simply the central pulse of this fictional world.

*The Mute Companion* is Narayan’s delightful animal story. It is about a monkey who performs for the deaf dumb and kind beggar to earn rice, edibles and coins. Once Sami (beggar) unwillingly holds the show in the *Varanda* of the big
bungalow and comes in a great trouble. While performing, the monkey sees a plate containing a slice of bread and some fruit and his mouth is watered. The master cannot control the monkey and he knocks down medicine and flower-vase and then disappears forever, deserts his master at the first opportunity he gets.

**Chippy** is a story about a dog that grapples with the agonies of jealousy. Like human beings Chippy hates another dog which his master brings in the house. Narayan playfully describes how Chippy hates another dog in these words:

> On the whole Chippy led very happy and contented life till one day Swami brought into the house another dog. Chippy would not have objected to another dog as such, but what he objected to was that this dog was short…. It could not be said that Chippy was of an ungenerous disposition, but he hated short dogs”.

Chippy feels jealous of another dog thereby we realize that Chippy is a living character who laughs, talks, hates, loves and even quarrels like human beings. In his short stories Narayan projects his faith in the oneness of creation in dealing with animal, human worlds together. His capacity for anthropomorphizing animal is commendable. His animal characters inhabit a world full of dangers and struggles similar to those of his human characters.

**Attila** anthologized in *Malgudi Days* is another amusing dog story. The dog is named **Attila** meaning **Scourge of Europe** the general whose name made Europe shiver in fright. However the dog never shows any fierce expression to the visitors. In fact, Attila is purchased as there had been house breakings and thefts in the neighborhood and the householders decide to put more trust in a dog than in the police. However, the purpose is not served because the strangers, visitors are welcomed by Attila. One day the notorious burglar Ranga enters the house and Attila lover of freedom, follows the thief faithfully. In the words of Narayan:

> Attila’s greatest ambition in life was to wander in the streets freely. Now things seemed to be shaping up ideally. 

Attila then becomes the close friend of the thief Ranga. After a week the eldest son in the family happens to see Attila trotting behind the thief on the road and in most unexpected fashion Attila becomes the hero. The thief is caught and ironically
enough Attila turns out to be the friendliest dog. Narayan narrates the whole incident in such a way that the dog becomes living character.

**Flavour of Coconut** anthologized in *Lawley Road and other Stories* is a story of rat which is trapped by the householders. It is an amusing story and the reader comes to know the real fact only in the second paragraph that the story is about the rat.

The Subject of all this discussion, as one ought to have guessed by now, was a little mouse, who had walked into a trap a moment ago. It is a humorous story of a mouse which is tried and sentenced by the members of the family.

**Naga** anthologized in *Malgudi Days* is also animal story but there is also a glimpse of the seamy side of Malgudi life in the father’s liaison with the blue-sari woman. R.K. Narayan has said, ‘I discover a story when a personality passes through a crisis of spirit or circumstances. A character faces some kind of crisis and either resolves it or lives with it’. The story Naga confirms this simple pattern. It is the story of the snake charmer and his young son. The young son faces two crises, when the story begins; he has already lived through the first one. Abandoned by his father, he has been forced to face life on his own. He has discovered that he has sufficient knowledge to carry on the family trade of snake charming; performing with Naga, the Cobra, the father has left behind. The story starts at a point close to the second crisis, which occurs when Naga old and tired has become a burden. The boy tries unsuccessfully to rid himself of his dependent by setting him free so he goes to Nallappa’s grove and releases Naga there but the snake returns to its basket. The boy goes away from the snake but there appears “Garuda” who is about to kill the Naga. The boy feels sympathy for the Naga and resumes responsibility of the snake. This is a variation on a theme that often appears in Narayan’s works; an individual’s impulse. The name of the monkey in this story is ‘Rama’ who is trained for performance by the father.

Narayan’s temperament and treatment of the animal world is commendable. A close reading of short stories dealing with animals reveals the fact that R.K. Narayan shows a good understanding of the animal world in being able to portray
their thoughts, love, and expression. The author believes that animals too have their own codes, signals and feelings. As already stated that Narayan is a keen observer of human and animal worlds and their likes and dislikes and mode of communication ensures a high degree of veracity.

**Humorous Stories**

R.K. Narayan’s fictional world is essentially comic and in his world he draws out the eccentricity of character and the comedy of life. One of the greatest inventions is his genial humour. He has comic view of life and sheer entertainment is the keynote of his short stories. It is to be noted that his humour is mild, refined and genial. His comic vision gives him the necessary detachment and compassion to make the portrayal not only faithful but also aesthetically satisfying. Ramesh K. Shrivastva beautifully comments on Narayan’s humour in these words:

R.K. Narayan’s “humour is a magnet that attracts every reader, a wind that sows the seed of pleasantry, a light that brightens a thousand faces and refreshing cool shower of rains that kindles the drooping spirit of people and fills them with a promise of new life. In characterization, in situations, in dialogues, in portraying the gulf that exists between illusion and reality, in what is and what ought to be, Narayan brings his humour in full play. He discovers something odd in what is ordinary, a quaint and queer in what is natural and familiar, and gives a comic turn even to what might otherwise have been serious issues of life.72

R.K. Narayan is a great humorist and his characteristic humour does not result from distortion, exaggeration. It results from an observation of the common human weaknesses, follies and foibles, and irony is the weapon he uses to expose weaknesses and absurdities. We get in him humour of character, humour of situation or farcical humour, irony, wit and mild satire. Narayan for his humour is often compared with the Russian Master Anton Chekov and he is called one of the greatest humourists. Even Murli Das Melwani describes Narayan as a humorist in these words:

….Narayan is not a moral analyst but an amused if bewildered observer of life’s variety and waywardness, a humorist in the true sense.73

81
Narayan’s humour springs from the ironical situations. The central situation in stories like *Cat Within, Lawley Road*, and *Engine Trouble* is amusing. Narayan’s focus is on the situation and thereby the humorous incident becomes extremely amusing. His ironical stance enables him to look at his fellowmen with an affectionately ridiculing eye.

R.K. Narayan seems to be master in giving a comic turn to serious issues of life and that could be appreciated and no doubt that is his great achievement. His simple aim is to bring out the ludicrous of the common happenings in a common man’s life. In his stories such as *Engine Trouble, Lawley Road, Attila*, his children Stories, we find a keen sense of the ludicrous. *Lawley Road* anthologized in *Malgudi Days* is an excellent example of misplaced enthusiasm of a municipal board to name the streets after national leaders. The author pokes gentle fun on the fixation of changing names of everything British after India got freedom. Narayan narrates the scene in these words:

> 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. Of course, it created a lot of hardship—letters went where they were not wanted; people were not able to say where they lived or direct others there. The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone.\(^{74}\)

The Municipal chairman of Malgudi and the council unanimously resolve to remove the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley and come in a great in trouble. According to them Sir Lawley was a tyrant white man, with the craftiness of Machiavelli who subjugated Indians with sword. In fact, Sir Lawley though he was an Englishman, was the well-wisher of Indian people and supporter of the Indian Freedom Struggle. The Talkative Man who had bought the statue to gain more money and the chairman of the Municipal Corporation who is after cheap popularity are satirized by Narayan. Lawley Road is Narayan’s an exquisite story and his skill as a humorous writer is at its best here when he blends humour and satire skilfully. Thus, *Lawley Road, The Martyr’s Corner, Sweets for Angels, The Shelter, Trail of the Green Blazer* take situations from life which are essentially ironical and humorous. Narayan’s fort is
humour. He is distinguished by his commitment to art, that is, aesthetic delight and entertainment. Indeed, Narayan is a realist taking a comedians look at the panorama of life. The humour ebbs out in telling. The author is an adept at his delightful narration and the very way in which he narrates his stories creates its own humour.

Narayan in his stories creates the joyous sense of life beautifully. *Engine Trouble, Cat Within, Like the Sun*, etc; are the examples. These stories are vivid stories narrated in a crisp style. Shekhar in *Like the Sun* anthologized in *Lawley Road and Other Stories* decides to practice truth at least one day in the year, according to him ‘Truth is like the Sun’.\(^\text{75}\)

However, when he speaks out truth, he comes in trouble. Here in this story also the author gives a comic turn to the serious issue. Shekhar is very serious but we laugh when he comments on the death of a person. He is supposed to be the admirer of the dead one and should not talk about his weak points. But he says,

‘Far from it, he (dead person) always struck me as a mean and selfish hypocrite’.\(^\text{76}\)

His wife expects a few words of praise from Shekhar for the breakfast she has made but he says,

‘It (breakfast) isn’t good. I’m unable to swallow it’.\(^\text{77}\)

The headmaster, the Sahib and high officials are to be flattered but Shekhar does not flatter his headmaster, a bad singer. Needless to say, that the hero has to pay a price ‘for the luxury of practicing truth’.\(^\text{78}\)

In his stories, R.K. Narayan makes the suffering either unreal or trivial and allows the otherwise painful events to seem funny.

R.K. Narayan’s amusing descriptions of the Talkative Man’s are commendable. The *Engine Trouble* from *Malgudi Days* is a delightful story. The Talkative Man’s trials and tribulations at winning a road engine in a lottery are full of rollicking fun. The birth of The Talkative man’s son in a frightening cyclonic night in *A Night of Cyclone* has been narrated with elements of exaggeration and hyperboles that give a comic turn to an otherwise serious incident. It would be apt to quote here how Narayan turns serious situations in comic one.

The Talkative Man rose and hallooed,
‘Boy! Come here!

A giggling, radiant urchin came in. The Talkative Man patted the urchin on the head and said,

‘Well, Sir, this is the gentleman who arrived on that fine night’. 79

Verbal humour in Fellow Feeling anthologized in Malgudi Days is unforgettable. It evokes laughter which is an end in itself. Narayan should be appreciated for his observation because his humour is never condescending. In the story the two persons belonging two different castes travel by the same train which is a typical scene in a crowded train compartment.

“Rajam Iyer gave a short laugh and said,

‘What has it do with your beastly conduct to this gentleman?’

The newcomer assumed a tone of mock humility and said,

‘Shall I take the dust from your feet?...

‘Your days are over, my dear. Sir, learn that I should like to see you trying a bit of bossing on us’.

“Whose master is who?”

said Rajam Iyer philosophically. The newcomer went on with no obvious relevance: The cost of mutton has gone up out of all proportion. It is nearly double what it used to be.

“Is it?” asked Rajam Iyer.

“Yes and why?”

continued the other. Because Brahmins have begun to eat meat and they pay high prices to get it secretly………... And we non-Brahmins have to pay the same price, though we don’t care for the secrecy”. 80

Comic scenes in Narayan’s fictional world bubble with joyous and merry laughter. His is the art for art’s sake. Flavour of Conconut and Attila are basically animal stories and the characters are a rat and a dog. They are the examples of
character humour. In *Flavour of Coconut* the criminal is not a human being but a rat that is under trial in the court.

*Attila* the dog is supposed to bark at the strangers but remains silent. Thus, the recognition between ‘What is’ and ‘what ought to be’ provokes laughter and the readers are entertained. The recognition between the normal situation and the incongruity creates ripples of laughter in R.K. Narayan’s short stories. The real secret of Narayan’s artistic performance lies in his gentle touch of humour, masterly use of irony and soft satire. We see nice amalgamation of humour and realism, and both intermingled into irony. In his fictional world tears and smiles, appearance and reality, beauty and ugliness, reason and passion, vice and virtue are inseparably interwoven artistically. The important aspect of his style is that he blends his gentle humour with a sense of the tragedy that underlines daily life. Therefore, we can say that Narayan’s humour is invariably laced with sadness. Hence, William Walsh’s comment on Narayan’s novel is also applicable to his short stories. Narayan’s comedies are comedies of sadness.

Narayan’s humorous stories may be compared with Chaucer. In his ‘The Canterbury Tales’ we find the comic portraits of Chaucer’s characters and his comic spirit make us smile and giggle. Chaucer has written these comic stories against the background of Canterbury. In the same fashion R.K. Narayan has his fictional town Malgudi as the background of many of his stories.

R.K. Narayan is a superb craftsman and comedian and “he can present smiles and tears together, smiling through the tears in things and glimpsing the rainbow magnificence of life”.

**Characters**

In Narayan’s fictional world, we find an immense variety of characters drawn from every walk of life. Most of his stories are stories of characters and they make a colourful portrait gallery. Narayan looks at life and into his characters as a sympathetic observer. Narayan himself admits that his focus is on character. Even in his autobiography Narayan talks about how he gets his characters for his short stories,
All morning I wondered. At every turn I found a character fit to go into a story while walking, ideas were conceived and developed, or sometimes lost through the interludes on the way.\textsuperscript{83}

We should note that Narayan’s Malgudi characters mostly belong to the common run of humanity and represent the South Indian life in particular and Indian life in general and culture with its paradoxes of life-wisdom and ignorance, profusion and poverty, joys and sorrows.

In Narayan’s stories we have astrologers, beggars, gatemen, students, hotel owners, children, servants, rickshaw pullers, harmless and helpless persons, traders, doctors, Americans, sadhus, harlots, pick-pocketeers, snake-charmers, etc. What R.K. Narayan says for the vendor in \textit{The Martyr’s Corner} is also applicable to him “His custom was drawn from the population swarming the pavement”.\textsuperscript{84}

The list is endless and a testimony to Narayan’s range and variety. After close reading of Narayan’s stories, we may divide his major characters into five categories.

I. Practical
II. Idealist
III. Sentimentalist
IV. Innocent
V. Silent

In \textit{The Missing Mail} we meet practical person postman, Thanappa. He does not deliver a letter and a telegram to Ramanujan for he knows that the marriage of Ramanujan’s daughter must not be postponed under any circumstances. It was only after the marriage; Ramanujan comes to know the sad death of his uncle. Similarly we come across astrologer in \textit{An Astrologer’s Day}, the priest in \textit{The White Flower} and \textit{The Watchman} who are practical.

There are idealists like Gopal (\textit{The Antitude}), Sambasivan (\textit{The Gold Belt}), Krishna (\textit{Artist’s Turn}), Soma (\textit{Such Perfection}), Kutti (\textit{The Performing Child}), Sekhar (\textit{Like The Sun}), Dr. Raman (\textit{The Doctor’s Word}), etc. Dr. Raman does not “believe that agreeable words ever save life”.\textsuperscript{85} He has developed a blunt truthfulness. It is none of his business to provide an unnecessary dope, when nature would tell the truth presently.
Vijaya (The Comedians) does not accept the gold medal when he knows that he has failed miserably to make the people laugh. Soma, the sculptor is not ready to maim the image of God though perfection infuriates nature. Then we come across sentimentalists like Iswaran, Sankar (The Evening Gift), The girl (The Watchman), Govind Singh (The Gateman’s Gift), etc. Iswaran behaves like a desperado. He presumes that he has failed at the examination, so he hates the idea of going to the Senate Hall to know the examination result. The gatemen Govind Singh does not follow the advice of the people to the registered letter that he has received and to read the content. The girl in The Watchman considers herself to be a burden and does not want anybody’s charity. She has lost hope of getting a scholarship. She feels that she has no home and wants to plunge into a watery grave.

Narayan’s servants seem to be honest, hardworking but rather simple to a fault. Some unusual event tempts them off the beaten track. As a result they become unhappy and make their masters miserable. Annamalai, Sam, Ranga, Ramu etc, are servants. Ranga thinks that he is only temporarily investing his master’s money in the race but soon disillusioned and shocked. He is unable to face his master so he goes to the sea with a view to commit suicide. Of course he does not commit suicide. Ramu (A Career) falls in love with a girl and squanders his master’s money and ruins his credulous master completely. As already stated Narayan’s children are innocent. His beggars are cheats. His women characters are silent, passive and unimpressive. They obey their husbands and do not have independent status.

Most of Narayan’s characters belong to middle class. He does not describe a character’s appearance, dress mannerism or other physical attributes. Murli Das Melwani says that almost all his characters are innocent:

Whatever the method of presentation, all Narayan’s characters share one characteristic: a beguiling innocence, the innocence of bewildered children in God’s great world. Some critics have mistaken the impression to suggest that Narayan patronizes his characters. Such a reading is wrong. His characters strike us as living in their own right, springing from life, and at the end of the story merging into it.86

Narayan is greatly interested in life and people and he knows that man is not wholly good or bad but odd mixture of vice and virtue. Narayan’s almost all
characters belong to the middle class but at the same time his stories are about any and every man. He depicts their joys and sorrows ironically, humorously and beautifully. It seems that he is least interested in depicting his characters intellectually or emotionally adventurous person. Narayan’s chief aim lies in creating characters that play their part in his fictional town. So creating a good number of unforgettable characters is his main concern.

Narayan has a thorough knowledge of his characters. This has been aptly pointed out by Narayan in an Interview with S. Krishnan;

I must be absolutely certain…about the psychology of the characters I am writing about, and I must be equally sure of the background. I know the Tamil and Kannada speaking people best. I know their background. I know how their minds work and almost as if it is happening to me. I know exactly what will happen to them in certain situations and under certain circumstances. And I know how they will react. I do not feel this kind of knowledge about Americans or America in spite of the time I have spent in that country. And anyway, there is so much diversity and individuality that almost anyone I meet provides me with material for a story.…

It is observed that almost all Narayan’s characters, however, humble they may be are complex. Undoubtedly, they possess a sense of wonder and enjoy the fringes of life. On the whole, Narayan’s characters are full of life and vitality.

**Technique**

R.K. Narayan follows the tradition of storytelling as it existed in ancient India, but adopts his style and form from the West. In the words of William Walsh-

His writing (R.K. Narayan) is a distinctive blend of Western technique and Eastern material and he has succeeded in a remarkable way in making an Indian sensibility at home in English art.

Narayan makes use of the ancient Indian techniques such as abrupt starting, happy endings and the presence of omniscient narrator in his short stories. Narayan accepts life in its entirety with traditional wisdom. He follows classical Indian
philosophical tradition. It emphasizes equanimity where one views the comedy and tragedy and the ups and downs of life as an inevitable part of human existence. Bishnu Sharma in his Panchatantra adopts the technique of tragicomedy where he presents even serious subject matter in a humorous way. There is a fine blending of tragic and comic aspects of life and Narayan who is deeply rooted in Indian tradition follows the same technique in his fictional world of Malgudi. At the same time, Narayan is influenced by great epic writers. In his own words:

After all, for any short story writer (Indian) the prototype still inevitably remains to be our own epics and the mythological stories.\(^8^9\)

The technique of Narayan’s short stories is clearly influenced by those of foreign masters that he is interested in. He adopts his form and style from the West. It seems that he is greatly influenced by O’Henry, Chekov, Somerset Maugham and others. Narayan is greatly appreciated for his technique all over the world. In The Weekly Mail (9th Jan. 1944) Narayan is admired as the blend of tragedy, humour and irony reaches almost uncanny perfection in his (Narayan) stories.\(^9^0\)

Narayan has his own style, and technique. Atma Ram has also appreciated the narrative technique of Narayan in these words-

His narrative technique enables Narayan to present a microcosm of Indian society. He avoids authorial comments and employs irony as a vision, not as a device. His humour is never satirical. He tries to offer an objective viewpoint and includes comments as a part of description and narration.\(^9^1\)

Simplicity is the hallmark of Narayan, however, it is to be noted that it is a deceptive simplicity. Murli Das Melwani opines that “He relates his incidents in a quiet, even a casual manner”.\(^9^2\)

Thus, the narrative skill of R.K. Narayan is unmatched. It is enchanting, gripping, persuasive and convincing. Narayan, indeed, is a born story-teller. His readers are charmed not only by his plot or the story but also by his narrative skill and the detailed description of even the ordinary things. Hence, we can say about Narayan that style is the man and man is the style.
First Person Narration

In some of his short stories R.K. Narayan makes good use of first person narrative style. In this technique the character tells the events he has himself witnessed or heard and so it is believed that he is telling the truth. This establishes a friendly relationship between the ‘I’ and the reader and gives the freshness of first-hand experience to the reader. The First Person narrative gives us a direct feel of the story and indicates how to view what the story has to offer. However, the limitations of this method are also very clear- we see everything only through the eyes of ‘I’, and the ‘I’ does all the interpretations of events for the reader. The narrator ‘I’ is sometimes an observer or other times he takes part in the action of the story. Narayan’s stories are well-made, compact and neatly structured. In a good number of Narayan’s stories The Talkative Man is the narrator.

Narayan’s Talkative Man is a unique character and with his superb style and skill has made his works memorable and readable. The Talkative Man may be a single man or different person named so. However, he seems to be fertile in his imagination to make his narration effective. At the same time he has a thorough knowledge of human psyche so that he can get a good response from the readers. The Talkative Man is a comic character par excellence with a profound understanding of the reader’s mind. He is gentle, wise, knowledgeable, a man of wide travel and experience and narrates his experiences with tireless enthusiasm. Narayan takes mostly funny incidents from life and beautifully narrates them in such a way that humour of situation is fully exploited. Many of his stories start with the simplest beginning.

“The Talkative Man Said”

And then the story is narrated by Narayan’s typical character Talkative Man. Narayan’s own comment on The Talkative Man is worth quoting here:

Talkative Man…he’s in many of the short stories: where some incredible experience has to be narrated, it’s the Talkative Man who talks. He’s a good link, he can link people up, he is a man who goes through the city like a breeze everywhere, who knows lots of people. He links up a lot of background and
personalities and landmarks very convincingly. Everybody is his friend. And he’s a generous man.\textsuperscript{93}

The Talkative Man narrates his personal experiences and this imparts verisimilitude and credibility to Narayan’s short stories. The invention of The Talkative Man is a device of great artistic significance. Kapileswar Parija in his research article on \textit{Short Stories of R.K. Narayan: An Evaluation} says:

The Talkative Man has great affinities with the story tellers in the Panchatantra and Jatak Tales. He is like Bodhisatva of the Jatak Tales, Sukhadev Muni of the Mahabharat and Kaka Bhusanda of the Ramayana. Thus Narayan is the inheritor of a great narrative tradition.\textsuperscript{94}

It is obvious that Narayan has deeper link with the Indian short story tradition and that makes him an excellent short story writer. Most of the ghost stories are narrated by The Talkative Man, while in other stories he provokes healthy laughter. Murli Das Melwani writes:

The Talkative Man spins tall yarns in which one fantastic happening follows another. As a character he has been more substantially drawn than Narayan’s other characters. Assumed modesty and the habit of digression are two of his more engaging traits. The tall stories reveal a strong sense of atmosphere, perhaps because The Talkative Man’s adventures take place in the unlikeliest places and he insists on describing at length the locales of his adventures.\textsuperscript{95}

Narayan is often criticized by the critics that his style is very simple. However, we should note that his simplicity is deceptive. One who is disciplined, studious and mature can make style easy. It is obvious that in Narayan we find harmonious blending of narrative technique, diction, subject matter and above all, his irony. The hallmarks of Narayan’s short stories are straightforward technique and simple diction which are admired by the readers.

\textbf{Flashback Technique}

In the flashback technique the narrator brings past events suddenly in the present time to give depth to the narrative. Narayan in some of his stories relates the
past and the present skillfully. In The Talkative Man stories and some other stories, Narayan has used the flashback technique effectively. **The Gateman’s Gift** from *Malgudi Days* is Narayan’s typical short story in which Narayan makes good use of the technique of flashback. The author begins the story of Govind Singh when he goes almost mad after receiving the letter of commendation from his superior, and then in the third paragraph he narrates the events that take place in the past. Now-a-days this method of narration is quite familiar, a method that either recapitulates or represents events of the past. This often moves the narration back and forth. By using flashback technique Narayan makes his narrative fresh, vigorous and interesting. As the past and present are cunningly jumbled, there is a constant impression of suspense and anticipation. The zigzag narration gives piquancy to his short story without in any way confusing the reader. Narayan in his stories, in this way, juxtaposes the past and the present, and each illuminates the other. Commenting on the technique of Narayan’s short stories William Walsh says:

> The technique of the stories is clearly influenced by those of the English writers in magazines that Narayan was familiar with in the twenties and thirties. Each has almost without exception the expected kick or sting or swing in the conclusion. The sharp surprise is for the most part, logically grounded in what has gone before, though not invariably so. 

**Epistolary Method**

The narrative in epistolary short story or novel is “conveyed entirely by an exchange of letter”. In the short story **Uncles Letters** Narayan has used the epistolary method to trace a man’s life from birth to death. Uncle in this story writes letters to his nephew and affords us an insight into the life of an average South Indian.

**The Plot, Beginning and Ending**

The short story has a small span and cannot afford to spend more space on the development of the plot. Plot, character, dialogue, setting, atmosphere and mode of narration are all interrelated aspects of the short story. But we should note that in the
final analysis, they are all used to highlight one thing- the theme of the story which runs like a thread through all these aspects. After the beginning, a short story immediately plunges into the course of plot and rapidly reaches the end. Much of the development of the plot and even the ending depends on the effective beginning of a short story. At the same time, the ending of the story is considered to be one of the most important characteristics of the short story as a form of literature. The short stories have different kinds of opening and soon after the opening the way of telling takes an interesting course. Similarly, the end of the story throws light back on the entire structure of the story or novel, and gives suddenly a somewhat new meaning to the entire structure. It is observed that almost all these aspects are found in Narayan’s fictional world. It is noteworthy that R.K. Narayan undoubtedly satisfies the essential qualities such as unity of impression, moments of crisis and symmetry of design in his short stories.

Simple but fascinating plot and strict economy of narration and beautiful simplicity of language are some of the most outstanding features of Narayan’s stories. His stories are captivating from the beginning to the end. He avoids lengthy and leisurely beginnings and he skillfully establishes a rapport with his readers. The opening sentence of his stories strikes the keynote and virtually hooks the readers. He suddenly plunges into the story proper instantly for instance, the story A Snake in the Grass begins in this manner:

On a sunny afternoon, when the inmates of the bungalow were at their siesta, a cyclist rang his bell at the gate frantically and announced: “A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel”. He pointed to its track under the gate, and resumed his journey.98

The moment you start to read the first sentence, your curiosity is aroused and the reader cannot put the book away till he finishes the story. Narayan’s beginnings of the stories have air of confidence and he entices the readers from the very beginning. Thus, the readers settle down to watch his characters grow and the plot unfold.

Most of the Talkative Stories have the same beginning

“The Talkative Man said”.

93
In short, R.K. Narayan being a master story teller has a proper beginning which is critically acclaimed.

The ending of the story is also equally important. The hidden truth becomes clear with the end of the story. The unexpected end or ‘twist ending’ comes as a shocking surprise in R.K. Narayan’s short stories. This technique of Narayan’s stories is clearly influenced by O’Henry. C.V. Venugopal observes—

….They rather end the O’Henry way, with a sudden reversal of situation… a feature decidedly a strong point of journalistic tradition.99

Narayan’s plot is organized in such a way as to emphasize its unexpected or surprising ending. Saturation with the material and practice with the theme are two important aspects of any good short story and it is observed that we find them in Narayan’s stories. The author has a working analysis of mankind’s troubles, hopes and aspirations, marriage, money and tangles of human ties like an astrologer in the short story An Astrologer’s Day. The story ends with the shock of the discovery that the astrologer was himself the person who stabbed Guru Nayak (now his customer) Narayan makes use of this technique in the stories like Father’s Help, Engine Trouble, Mother and Son, Missing Mail, Out of Business, etc. These stories are built round the principle of simple irony of circumstances, leading to shock of discovery or surprise at the end. In Mother and Son, the fear of the mother is finally relieved on finding her son safe next morning. In Engine Trouble the fortune of getting a lottery brings untold misfortune to the winner who is the narrator. An earthquake luckily solves the problem of the narrator. In Father’s Help the letter written by father to solve the problem turns out be an instrument, an instrument of punishment. In some of Narayan’s stories, it is the time factor that solves the problems.

Narayan’s ending is like a sting in tail and important point is that he resorts to the brief ending.

Language

A careful analysis of the language gives us the signs of short story writer’s attitude to life, to his values and his morality which we call it author’s point of view. Language of the short story is characterized by economy and directness. It requires
apt words and the telling phrases. Descriptive passages are valuable to contribute
towards the total effect. The Indian writers in English have tried their best, of using
the English language in a way that will be distinctively Indian and still remains
English. Narayan is well aware of the fact that English is the language of the
colonialist, yet he is found to have accepted it for practical reasons. Narayan portrays
himself as an Indian writer in English and suggests that just the Americans have
revitalized the English language and made it their own; we also in India must have a
“Bharat Brand of English”. He welcomes the English language. In this connection
Mohan G. Ramanan remarks:

Narayan is a supporter of English. He does believe in the Indianization of
English but he does not quite go the way of Raja Rao in bending English
syntax for his purposes, making it pliable for the expression of Indian
experience. Nor does he ‘Chutnify’ English as Rushdie does in his
contemporary restatement of the earlier procedures of Raja Rao and
G.V.Desai.100

Narayan’s mother tongue is Tamil and if he has to reach out to a vast
audience, it is but natural that he should write in English. Narayan opines that the
language has so far been the exclusive preserve of elite classes who make laws,
dispense justice and run administration of the country.

Now the time is ripe for English to come to the dusty street, market place and
under the Bunyan tree.101

This is where Narayan’s astrologer or any other character might be plying
their trades and in choosing to let them speak in English. Narayan was making an
important choice putting into practice his belief that English must adopt the
complexion of our life and assimilate its idioms. He is not suggesting here a
mongrelisation of the language. His Bharat Brand of English would respect the rule
of law and maintain dignity of grammar, but still have a Swadeshi stamp about it
unmistakably. In the words of K.R.S. Iyengar:

....He (Narayan) uses the English language much as we used to wear dhoties
manufactured in Lancashire- but the thoughts and feelings; the stirrings of the
soul, the wayward movements of the unconsciousness are all of India,
recognizably autochthonous. He is one of the few writers in India who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument perusing with a sense of dedication what may often seem to be mirage of technical perfection.\textsuperscript{102}

Narayan feels at home whenever he writes in English. It comes to him naturally. He states that:

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. I can’t explain how English is very adaptable language. And it’s so transparent; it can take on the tint of any country.\textsuperscript{103}

Narayan asserted that the process of Indianization should take place and the English should become one of the Indian languages. Narayan makes it clear that English language has served his purpose in his essay “English in India: The Process of Transmutation.”

I cannot say whether this process of transmutation is to be viewed as an enrichment of the English language or a debasement of it. All that I am able to confirm, after nearly thirty years of writing, is that it has served my purpose admirably, of conveying unambiguously the thoughts and acts of a set of personalities, who flourish in a small town named Malgudi (supposed to be) located in a corner of South India.\textsuperscript{104}

R.K. Narayan uses pure, limpid English. His language is easy and natural in its run and tone but always an evolved and conscious medium. In its structure and address Narayan’s English is a moderate traditional instrument.

R.K. Narayan’s short stories are distinguished by the extreme simplicity and purity of diction. His English is clean, racy and vivid. His themes, characters and dialogues are able to carry the feelings and sounds of the South Indian town, Malgudi. There is nothing sort of distortion of the rules of English grammar and use of a lot of Indian words. The miraculous working of language as a tool of his art is his achievement. A creative writer has to struggle hard for communicating his vision in a language other than his own. Narayan has made laudable efforts to harness the rich resources of English and mix it up with native colours. His style is similar to Tamil
uses and there is also spontaneous use of Indian English idioms. His Tamil usage is most obvious in the use of words. He has used a number of Indian words in his stories and novels. The words such as ‘Anna’, ‘Pyol’, ‘Jukta’ are used repeatedly. The list is endless but here a few words are enough to know how Narayan has used Indian words appropriately in his short stories. All these following words appear in Narayan’s collection of short stories entitled **Malgudi Days** (Chennai, Indian Thought Publications, 1996):

- **Aiyoo**: exclamation, surprise (Cat Within, P. 295)
- **Almirah**: cupboard. (Emden, p. 355)
- **Amma**: mother (Hungry Child P. 344)
- **Appolam**: fried delicacy made of rice and other grains. (Hungry Child, p. 336)
- **Bhajji**: a sort of cutlet made with sliced vegetables. (Hungry Child, p. 336)
- **Beedi**: leaf wrapped tobacco. (God And Cobbler, p. 325)
- **Bhairavi raga**: a melodical classification. (The Snake Song, p. 95)
- **Bhajan**: a collective prayer song. (Selvi, p. 238)
- **Bonda**: fried eatable made with flour. (The Martyr’s Corner, p. 165)
- **Bund**: elevated border of tank or river. (Mother And Son, p. 211)
- **Chappati**: white flour pancake. (The Martyr’s Corner, p. 165)
- **Choultry**: rest house for travellers. (The Blind Dog, p. 42)
- **Dakshina**: Fee (Cat Within, p. 300)
- **Darshsan**: grace conferred on the beholder of a godly person (Selvi, p. 232)
- **Dhoti**: strong like men’s garment tucked and knotted at the waist. (Fellow:Feelings, p. 53)
- **Dosai**: fried cake of rice paste. (The Martyrs Corner, p. 197)
- **Idli**: steamed rice cake. (Naga, p.225)
- **Jilebi**: a sweet (Emden, p. 339, Hungry Child, p. 336)
- **Jukta**: two wheeled horse drawn carriage. (Father’s Help, p. 83)
- **Karma**: Hindu theological idea meaning destiny, desert, and the doctrine that one’s present action continues to have effects in another incarnation. (Cat Within, p. 290)
- **Lathi**: heavy stick, often bamboo, bound with iron. (The Martyrs Corner, p. 171)
- **Mahuratam**: auspicious moment. (Missing Mail, p. 16)
Namaste: greeting (Selvi P. 239)
Om: a mystical syllable. (English Trouble, p. 108)
Pallavi: special item in a musical concert. (Selvi, p. 238)
Punnaga Varali: a particular melody. (The Snake Song, p. 96)
Pendal: a special shed put up for an assembly. (Missing Mail, p. 16)
Pie: smallest coin in old currency. (An Astrologer’s Day, p. 5)
Pongal: festival. (The Axe, p. 139)
Pyol: platform built along the house wall that faces street. (An Astrologer’s Day, p. 9)
Sadhu: hermit or recluse. (The Snake Song, p. 95)
Sandhi: devotion at morning, noon and evening. (Fellow Feelings, p. 48)
Shikari: professional hunter. (Trail of Green Blazer, p. 159)
Sowcar: moneylender or financer. (Cat Within, p. 296)
Swarga loka: heaven. (The Axe, p. 138)
Salaam: greeting, “I bow before thee”. (Gateman’s Gift, p. 29)
Thambura: stringed instrument used for accompaniment. (Selvi P. 244)
Tonga: Two wheeler vehicle drawn by a horse (Mother and Son P.211)

Narayan makes use of new composite words such as ‘nose led’, ‘linecleared’.
At the same time, many Indian English idioms and proverbs commonly appear in
Narayan’s fiction and there is also spontaneous use of Indian English idioms. For
instance: (The following idioms occur in Narayan’s Malgudi Days, Chennai, Indian
Thought Publications, 2012)

“If you throw a stone into a gutter, it would only spurt filth in your face.”
(“Fellow Feelings”, p. 50)

“The Gods grow jealous of too much contentment.”
(The Martyr’s Corner, p. 169)

On the whole, Narayan’s stories are marked by a beautiful simplicity of
language. The structure and linguistic simplicity of his short stories entice any reader:
Narayan “is conscious of the foreign origin of the language and its imperial
connotation. Notwithstanding, he clearly depicts how the English language
has established a firm root in India and became an essential part of its social
reality. Thus, Narayan’s voice is rather polyphonic. That is to say, Narayan
seems to believe that it is impossible to eliminate the English language from the social reality of India. And he pragmatically suggests that the acceptance of the language in its Indianised form.\textsuperscript{105}

His Tamil usage is most obvious in the use of verbs. In his fiction, we very often come across the interrogative ‘have’ used without ‘got’. For example, “How many sons and daughters have you?” also we find the common construction in his stories where he makes use of imperative ‘let’ at the beginning of a sentence.

“The let him demand them immediately if he wants betel leaves also.”

“Only please let him mug up the 16\textsuperscript{th} table a little more….”\textsuperscript{106}

Narayan sticks to Standard English and never attempt to convey the flavour of Tamil or any other Indian language. His English seems to be clean, racy, and vivid. He avoids constant use of compound sentences. In his language, syntax comes closer to the pattern of normal conversation of an educated Indian. It hardly pricks; it only generates affluent humour and life. Narayan combines satire with humour to laugh at the laughable foibles of human nature.

In a nutshell, we can say that Narayan’s stories are marked by a beautiful simplicity of language. Narayan’s simple diction coupled with straightforward narration has attracted a large number of readers.

**Limitations**

Critics are of the opinion that R.K. Narayan has no philosophical or socialistic concern. He is rooted in his limited world. It seems that Narayan according to critics is a non-committed writer. In *The Ironic Vision* M.K. Naik comments:

“We may not find in his pages the urgent social and political relevance of Mulk Raj Anand at his best, nor the poetic insights, the imaginative flights and the philosophical profundities of Raja Rao.\textsuperscript{107}

It is quite true that R.K. Narayan is not a committed writer in the same way as Mulk Raj Anand is. However, this does not mean that Narayan works in total vacuum. Narayan is a true artist whose primary business is to create an aesthetic longingness into the heart of the readers than to teach or preach them. He is an ironist, amused observer of the innumerable follies and foibles. In most of his stories
there is satire—of course, it is mild. As a matter of fact, a true artist is not supposed to have any particular theory or principle to express. R.K. Narayan’s main purpose in his fictional world is not to deal with any particular movement, principle or ideal but to create artistic beauty with all its complexities and ambiguities. Perhaps, that is why the irony used by Narayan is seldom directed against society rather it is full of artistic exuberance.

The point is that R.K. Narayan is not loud in his intention or correction but it would be unfair to say that there is total absence of intention in Narayan. In Narayan’s short fiction there is mild dose of instruction and which is enough to drive home certain truths to the readers. Narayan intentionally takes the role of a true artist and admits that his attitude towards life is unserious. Perfection is unattainable and Narayan has also his own limitations. Most of Narayan’s stories are well-made compact and neatly structured. The only exceptions are stories like Annamalai, Uncle, and A Horse and Two Goats. These stories tend to be ‘discursive’.¹⁰⁸

The stories like Emden, Breath of Lucifer, Annamalai, and Uncle are very lengthy and tiresome.

Narayan’s fictional locale is Malgudi and most of his stories and novels are set in this town. Almost all his characters are portrayed in Malgudi and the readers feel it boredom to stay too long at one place. Narayan’s short stories, no doubt amuse the readers that is why the famous director Shankar Nag accepted the offer and directed Malgudi Days based on the collection of short stories by R.K. Narayan in 1987. The teleserial on Door Darshan was very popular among the audience and it was rated as one of the finest serials ever to be made in the history of Indian Television.

Yet, some of Narayan’s short stories seem to be repetitive and after reading twenty or twenty five stories one set the impression of artificiality. Similarly, many readers get tired of Narayan’s mediocre stereotyped heroes after going through a few of these stories.

One of the significant features of Narayan’s short stories is that there is a refreshing variety in the subject matter throughout; however, the stories like The One Armed Giant and The Man-Hunt have nothing new to offer. Moreover, there are
some stories which have failed to captivate the readers. The stories such as Uncle’s Letter, The Man-Hunt, The Watchman, The One Armed Giant have insipid and weak plots. It would not be wrong if we say that sometimes Narayan fails to come up to our expectations. In Dasi The Bridegroom, Narayan has not portrayed the character of the protagonist Dasi effectively.

M.K. Naik in his The Ironic Vision draws our attention to Narayan’s limitations with regard to supernatural stories:

Another group of stories which also betrays the same disastrous failure of the imagination comprises more than a dozen exercises in the supernatural that Narayan has attempted. The ghost stories- The Level-Crossing, An Accident, Old Bones and Old Man of the Temple- fail to rise above the level of traveler’s yarns, and ‘The Snake Song’, the tale of a sadhu’s curse, deserves the same verdict.\(^{109}\)

It is noticed that Narayan’s women characters are weak or silent and to our surprise they are not given names. In short, Narayan has not created memorable women characters in his short fiction. R.K. Narayan is an intellectual who has known the middle class life of South India at close quarters. But it is observed that depths of pathos that move the very inner fibre are beyond the range of Narayan. He is good at undertones but bold and dramatic flashes are not for him. The dregs of poverty, the crushing loads of misery cannot be found in the short stories of Narayan. Sometimes R.K. Narayan does not dwell deep into anything serious or tragic. That’s why C.V. Venugopal states:

In his short stories particularly he seems to shut himself against certain extremely disturbing yet very real elements in life such as the death of a beloved, the loss of the honour or the heart breaking pangs of infidelity.\(^ {110}\)

In spite of the fact, millions of his admirers all over the world are grateful to Narayan for the short stories and novels he has delighted them. Narayan, no doubt has his limitations but his successes certainly outnumber them. Narayan’s stories are remarkable for their distinctive Indian character and life and certainly have enriched the Indian English Literature and have assured for him a place in the English Literature of the world.
Summing up this aspect the comment of P.K. Panigrahi would help us to know the weak points of R.K. Narayan:

While I did appreciate most of the stories, you tend to sometimes find places where narrative becomes awkward for some reason which I could not put my finger on. Astute readers will also notice a naive streak in Narayan here and there. There are some places in the narration where Narayan doesn’t know how to leave some things to the reader’s imagination. But overall the weak points are far and few between and after warming up with the first couple of stories, you tend to begin enjoying Narayan a lot more. I think essentially it is up to the reader to relate to what Narayan says and not the other way round. The author makes absolutely no effort to relate to the reader in many parts and so sometimes the reader might feel alienated or remote from the stories, especially a non-Indian reader. Finally I must give four out of five starts to Malgudi Days.\textsuperscript{111}

**Universal Appeal**

R.K. Narayan’s fictional world is universal. The innate humanism of the writer’s vision imparts to his writing warmth which is the secret of his universal appeal and abiding charm. The life of the microcosm becomes a reflection of the macrocosmic life. In his fictional world the local and the particular become the universal and the general. Almost all his stories deal with basic emotions like hope, pride, ambition, superstitions, suspicion, gullibility, etc. It is quite true that any reader or audience from any country would identify himself with any of R.K. Narayan’s character and that is his great achievement. The hero of Narayan’s short stories is the middle class common man. Narayan in his Next Sunday describes him as a modern unknown warrior. The prominent middle class milieu in all Narayan’s short stories brings to him. R.K. Narayan, the great short story writer of India falls into that category whose works appeal to all sections of society. Like any great literary artist, his works are free from every theory but appeal to the most various men and women. Narayan’s Malgudi can be found everywhere. His characters, no doubt have universal
appeal. Narayan is deeply rooted in Indian soil without in the least detracting from its universality.

Narayan’s devotion, sincerity and artistry make him a devoted and successful short story writer. Within his limited range Narayan is able to present a picture of life which crosses the barriers of space and time. He has never set out to be a moralizer, crusader or reformer. He is a pure artist and so like all great artists he also stresses on propriety and integrity which can make human life more beautiful, more worth living and nobler.

References

2. Ibid., P.1
4. Murli Das Melwani, Themes in the Indian Short Story in English (Bareilly, Prakash Book Depot, 2009) p. 28
5. K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (Asia Publishing House, 1962) P.300
6. Parvathy Bhogaraju, The Indian Express, April 5, 1979 P.7
10. Ibid. (Introduction).
11. K. R. Shrinivasa Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1962) P.281
19. Ibid., P. 281
34. Ramesh K. Shrivastav, *Six Indian Novelists in English*, (Amritsar, Published by Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987) P. 69
40. Ibid., PP. 71,72
45. R.K. Narayan, **Under The Banyan Tree and Other Stories** (Chennai, Indian Thought Publications, 2011) P. 175

46. Ibid., P. 177

47. Ibid., P. 177-78

48. Ibid., P. 158

49. R. K. Narayan, **Malgudi Days** (Chennai, Indian Thought Publications 2012) P. 127

50. R. K. Narayan, **Lawley Road and Other Stories** (Mysore, Indian Thought Publications, 1956) P. 33

51. R.K. Narayan, **Under The Banyan Tree and Other Stories** (Chennai, Indian Thought Publications, 2011) P. 97

52. Ibid., P. 101

53. R. K. Narayan, **Malgudi Days** (Chennai, Indian Thought Publications 2012) P. 43

54. Ibid., P. 46

55. Ibid., P. 46

56. Ibid., P. 5


58. R.K. Narayan, **A Tiger for Malgudi** (Mysore, Indian Thought Publications, 1983) PP. 8-9

59. R.K. Narayan, **The Talkative Man of Malgudi Talks** (Kissan World (Feb.) 1986) PP. 15-17

60. R. K. Narayan, **Lawley Road and Other Stories** (Mysore, Indian Thought Publications, 1956) PP. 56-57


62. R. K. Narayan, **Lawley Road and Other Stories** (Mysore, Indian Thought Publications, 1956) P. 78

63. Ibid., P. 79

64. Mohan G. Ramanan, **Contemporary Indian Writers in English, R. K. Narayan, An Introduction** (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press India PVT. Ltd 2013) P. 102
71. Ibid., *Author’s Introduction*
72. Ramesh K. Shrivastava, *Six Indian Novelists in English* (Amritsar, Published by Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987) P. 74
73. Murli Das Melwani, *Themes in the Indian Short Story in English* (Bareilly, Prakash Book Depot, 2009 P. 30
76. Ibid., P. 137
77. Ibid., P. 137
78. Ibid., P. 140
79. Ibid., P. 114
85. Ibid., P. 20
93. Susan Ram, *50 Years of Story-Telling*, further details not available
97. M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Term* (Delhi, Macmillan India LTD.) P. 116


*****