CHAPTER IV
FAITH AND IDENTITY
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FANTASY AND REALITY

One of the "New Stories" included in Malgudi Days, "Naga," is an interesting story which reveals the human being in all his weakness as well as strength. It is through the snake that both the snake charmer and his son earn their living, and the story reveals how even as there is desertion and betrayal at one end, there is a saving instinct at the other asserting itself when the object of sustenance is under threat.

The story entitled "Naga" deals with the life of a boy and his father who earned their livelihood as snake charmers. With the snake becoming old and losing its ability, the livelihood of the boy is threatened because he is no longer able to please his customers. The father's preamble to a show has become a weary account in which he narrated the mythic sanctity associated with the serpent. As in the Talkative Man stories, there is an attempt initially on the part of the boy to enter into a world of fantasy in order to demonstrate to his audience that it was under God's command that he took to this
profession and that God also gave him the antidote for snake poison. This story subtly blends folk mythology in its early part. The entire superstitious faith about a serpent in folk life is brought home:

"After all, what is a serpent? A great soul in a state of penance waiting to go back to its heavenly world. That is all, sirs."

The story shows how at one stage a monkey has been domesticated by the father and son for the sake of a badly needed increase in their income.

The monkey performs certain of the feats that Hanuman, the Divine Monkey of the Ramayana, performed. Named Rama, the monkey becomes popular with school children. While the father carried on with his cobra basket and gourd pipe, the boy performed with the monkey at market fairs and earned enough money to indulge in the luxury of tiffin at a restaurant. The story of happiness ends here. All on a sudden, the boy discovers that the monkey and the father are missing. Here is a tale of betrayal. The father, lured by a woman of suspicious morality, leaves the son in the lurch and makes off with their real source of income, the monkey.
When people take pity on the boy and offer him tiffin and words of consolation, the boy starts recounting how the father carried on with his clandestine activity. Not until this moment does it dawn upon the boy that the father had indeed betrayed him.

As days pass by, the snake becomes old and the gourd pipe does not earn the boy enough living. Caught between sentimental attachment to the snake and the dire need for making a living, the boy decides to cast the snake away. But his act is not one of betrayal but one imbued with a sense of concern for the snake's freedom as well as safety. He gently and lovingly leads it to its natural habitat:

He carried the snake basket along to a lonely spot down the river course, away from human habitation, where a snake could move about in peace without getting killed at sight. In that lonely part of Nallappa's grove, there were many mounds, crevasses and anthills. "You could make your home anywhere there, and your cousins will be happy to receive you back into their fold," he said to the snake. (p.153)
But soon, as his Naga glides along majestically across the ground, the boy notices a kite, "Garuda" for him, trailing the course of the snake. This makes the boy retrieve his basket and dash back to the snake to protect it from the claws of the kite. Even here the story blends realism and folk mythology and popular superstition. The sight of the Garuda makes the boy pay his obeisance to it, even as a very human impulse, that of the saviour, instantly shows forth in him:

As was the custom, he made obeisance to it by touching his eyes with his finger tips. Garuda was the vehicle of God Vishnu and was sacred. He shut his eyes in a brief prayer to the bird. "You are a god, but I know you eat snakes. Please leave Naga alone." He opened his eyes and saw the kite skimming along a little nearer, its shadow almost trailing the course of the lethargic snake. "Oh!" he screamed. "I know your purpose." (p.154)

The story "Naga" thus is interspersed with details and anecdotal about popular superstitious assumptions, though in its blend of the elements of
fantasy and realism it is not of the order of many of the Talkative Man stories. The Naga episode is used in order to highlight certain basic human impulses: the blessedness of childhood and the wickedness of old age when man acquires a strain of self-interest.

"Under the Banyan Tree" is a fascinating story which deals with the theme of divine inspiration behind narrative composition. In this story, Narayan builds up an elaborate edifice for the protagonist's inspirational zeal. The protagonist is an illiterate who kept the whole village in a kind of perpetual enchantment by the fibs he would weave from his rich and fantastic storehouse of memory accentuated as it were by the muse's blessing. He is in a sense an epic narrator representing the tradition of orality, for the written word was a mystery to him. He spent most part of the day under the shade of a banyan tree and offered worship at the temple of Goddess Shakti. An aura of mysticism hangs around him and he reels out stories to entertain and enlighten the village folk. True to the spirit of the epic tradition and orality, Nambi could weave lengthy tales, now about Vikramaditya and now
about Dasaratha. A special feature of his story telling is that, maybe as a Drasta, he would make himself contemporaneous with the events he narrates and gives the people a feel of the bygone mythic age:

Jerking his finger toward a vague, far-away destination, he asked, "A thousand years ago, a stone's throw in that direction, what do you think there was? It was not the weed-covered waste it is now, for donkeys to roll in. It was not the ash-pit it is now. It was the capital of the king***" The king would be Dasaratha, Vikramaditya, Asoka, or anyone that came into the old man's head; the capital was called Kapila, Kridapura, or anything.²

Consonant with the events of a magnitude and scale of action which Nambi describes, his own age is either sixty or eighty or one hundred and eighty, as he says. If anyone asked Nambi his age, he referred to an ancient famine or an invasion. The story, "Under the Banyan Tree," gets an ironic twist when all of a sudden Nambi's capacity for spinning yarn seems to have been affected. He feels as if the springs of creativity in him have dried up.
Though initially he does not acknowledge this, after prayer to the Goddess, he realizes what was happening to him. He was harrowed by the thoughts of his failure. After remaining in meditation, he comes to a decision but announces it rather dramatically after going round the village and telling his listeners that he had a wonderful story to narrate. This is where the typical Narayan twist is introduced in the story. Nambi assembles everyone from the village only to tell them that it is the Goddess who gives the gifts and also takes them away again, for she is the source spring of creativity. The human being is only an instrument in the hands of divine providence:

"It is the Mother who gives the gifts; and it is She who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say.... But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone? Goddess be thanked.... These are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story." (p.228)
"Under the Banyan Tree" is remarkable for dexterously invoking the idea of poetic inspiration. This is done without so much as introducing a supra-rational phenomenon. The story, at a basic level, is intimately interlinked with a typical village environment and the popular folk tale tradition that is still alive in the villages. One of the characteristics of Narayan's tales is that there is no deeper probing of the psychological traits that motivate character. The darker aspects of life are in general set aside in this ironic examination of life. Narayan has the gift of the ideal humorist in whose work there is little tragedy. That which is gloomy is rendered sunny in the subtle twists of the narrative.

An interesting story among "New Stories" appended to *Malgudi Days* is "Cat Within." In this story folk superstition and demonology are used in order to extract a confession from a shopkeeper. In its building up of the confessional set up, the story reminds us of "An Astrologer's Day," especially in its unravelling of guilt from the dark recesses of the heart in a moment of crisis. But "Cat Within"
not only elaborately builds up an atmosphere for an exorcist to work in but also retains a firm contact with the reality of existence as experienced by the tenants of an ancient house in Vinayak Mudali Street. One of the fine qualities of this short story is that even as the encounter between the exorcist and the so called evil spirit takes place, as though in the form of a choric comment, a series of responses to the illusion of shelter and privacy of the hapless tenants and their agonies are highlighted:

Someone in the crowd added,
"Only a single well for twenty families, a single lavatory!"

A wag added, "When I lie in bed with my wife, the littlest whisper between us is heard on all sides."

Another retorted, "But you are not married."

"What if? There are others with families."

"None of your business to become a champion for others. They can look after themselves."

Bang! Bang!

"It's his sinfulness that has brought this haunting," someone said, pointing at the shopman.
What happens in the shopkeeper's shop is that a furtive cat in search of a mouse thrusts its head in a jug and cannot extricate itself from the "jug-crown." In a panic-stricken condition, the cat jumps "high and about" and bangs its hooded head against every possible object, losing its sanity completely. The shopman is so miserly that he does not even have candles with the help of which to notice the movements and sounds inside the room. It was just assumed to be the work of some devilish creature and so an exorcist living in one of the tenements rented out by the shopman was woken up for his professional help. The exorcist hears the strange sounds and gets ready to clear the place of the devil. Though the shopman and his miserable plight are vividly narrated in the story, the exorcist is the centre piece of the narrative. The story is in the manner of an Ibsenian account in its stress on the extortion of a confession and the working out of the ways of conscience. There is a devastating satire, though appearing in a controlled, measured rhythm, on the essentially deceptive ways of the exorcist for whom drawing out a confession would perhaps mean an opportunity to have a strangle-hold on his customer:
"I have told you not to talk unnecessarily. Did you ever molest any helpless woman or keep her at your mercy? If you have done a wrong in your childhood, you could expiate...." "How?"

"That I'll explain, but first confess..."

"Why?"

"A true repentance on your part will emasculate the evil spirit ...."

"Please stop that somehow, I can't bear it." The exorcist lit a piece of camphor, his stock-in-trade, and circled the flame in all directions.

"To propitiate the benign spirits around so that they come to our aid..." (p.200)

The story ends on a comic note with the cat dashing out of the room with its metal hood on. Even after noticing that it was after all a cat, still a vague fear haunts the shopman that it could return any moment. The story, "Cat Within," thus derives its strength from popular superstition. In Narayan's inimitable style it reveals a texture of rural life and explores the intricacies of the guilt-ridden conscience. The title of the story thus aptly illustrates the mind of the Shopman.

"God and the Cobbler" is a short story in which Narayan's ironic mode reveals the subtleties
and modulations of a concept of Godhood associated with one’s total absorption in his work and his serene, detached state of deep meditation as it were. The story shows us an encounter between a cobbler and a hippie. The hippie appears to the cobbler to be like Lord Shiva himself with the cobra coiling round his neck missing:

> He thought, "This man is tramping down from the Himalayas, the abode of Shiva, as his tough leather sandals, thick with patches, indicate."

Likewise for the Hippie, the Cobbler appeared like a God sitting as he was under the shade of the margosa tree. The place where the Cobbler sat gave the Hippie the impression of being a place of ineffable peace. It was as though the Cobbler was a god on whom were sprinkled flowers from the tree. The story subtly interfuses the elements of the realistic and fantastic in the descriptions of the Cobbler and the Hippie. The Hippie recounts his experiences with the mysteries of secret India.

> There were fire-eaters, swallowers of swords and chewers of glass and cactus. Or the yogis who sat in
cremation grounds in a cataleptic state, night and day, without food or movement, unmindful of the corpses burning on the pyres around them. (p. 218)

The Hippie, during his extensive wanderings, across the country, has discovered a serenity, a contemplative philosophical disposition and a total acceptance of life all around him. Finally, he opens a conversation with the Cobbler by telling him that flowers raining upon him is a sign of blessedness. The conversation between the Hippie and the Cobbler turns now on God, the mysterious nature of His functioning, and the immensity of His programme and purpose. But for God's eternal vigilance, there would have been a cataclysmic disaster in the world. The philosophical weight of this discussion is derived not from the learned discourse contained in the Cobbler's utterance but from his experience and from what he has heard from the temple priest, that is, from a tradition of orality. A philosophical disposition of forbearance emerges from the Cobbler's outlook on the world. Side by side with this disposition, there is also, as Narayan's deeply ironic
vision informs the reader, a not unrealistic concern with his professional profit which though is marginal. From philosophy there is a journey, in the course of the conversation, to the field of economics and inflation. From there again there is a progress, but this time in an inward direction. The question is, what kind of a "monumental balance sheet" approximate for each individual be struck?

"The Edge" is a short story in which there is pungent sarcasm on family planning and the methods employed by the Government agencies for procuring cases. Apart from sarcastic references to family planning, the story narrates the tale of Ranga and his termagant wife and their daughter whose education and proper upbringing form the centre of the life of the husband and the wife. Ranga by profession was a sharpener of knives and he went about Malgudi town carrying his grinding wheel and carrying on with an air of one who had lived since times immemorial. A familiar figure on the streets of Malgudi, he fancies that "if armies employed swords he could become a millionaire." 5

The first part of the story relates Ranga's regular pyrotechnic displays appealing to the passing
children who stood transfixed by the spectacle and also his efforts to make an honest penny. An account is also given of Ranga's attempts to rise above his station at least in so far as getting his daughter educated. Narayan introduces in this story the theme of the girl child's education. Ranga was convinced that the daughter should have a different life from his own. In this concern he surprises his wife who remains ignorant of the advantages of education. To assuage her fears, he says to her thus:

"You only want more money, don't you?"

"Yes, let me see what black magic you will perform to produce more money."

"You leave the girl alone, and I will find a way..."

"Between you two ... well, you are bent upon making her a worthless flirt wearing ribbons in her hair, imitating the rich folk... If she develops into a termagant, don't blame me, please. She is already self-willed and talks back." (pp.207-208)

It is after this that Ranga makes an exploratory trip to Malgudi where he settles down to work
at an improvised dwelling place, Krishna Hall. But his family remains in the village. The story, a satire on coercive methods employed for implementing family planning, shows how Ranga was tricked into a family planning camp with the lure of a transistor radio and thirty-five rupees. There is then the episode of Ranga's irrelevant replies to the questions asked and his final exposure to what he fears the threat of extinction at the very sight of the "white tray with shining knives neatly arranged" (p. 213). There is a touch of humour here even in the pathetic state in which Ranga finds himself when he realizes, with a professional eye, that the surgical instruments had been perfectly honed. Seized with panic at the prospect of being sliced up, Ranga shakes himself free and storms out of the family planning camp.

This is a short story in which there is an unwavering concentration on the plight and predicament of the central character. A suggested theme not developed in the course of the narration is the educational uplift of the young so imaginatively visualized by Ranga. What is nevertheless pointed out in the story is that the lure of gain
from the unknown task ahead, about which Ranga is both suspicious and confused, is to be bestowed on his daughter without her mother's knowledge.

The story "Emden" in the new stories section of *Malgudi Days* recaptures the rhythms of leisure and detachment attendant upon old age. It relates the story of Rao who was the oldest man in the town. He lived beyond ninety or one hundred and five and he was not even in a position to prop himself up for standing in a group photograph on the occasion of the propitiatory rites associated with his eightieth birthday. The story in a way hints at the perils of non-observance of family planning. In that sense, the story is something of a complement to "The Edge."

As Narayan describes it, Malgudi with all its comic amalgamation and assortment of people holds the very image of the incongruities and oddities of the society in general. In the words of A.N.Kaul, Malgudi is an Indian small town and stands at a nicely calculated comic distance between the East and the West. Just as the true tragedy of colonialism lay in the culturally untouched but economically ravaged Indian countryside, "the true comedy of this same historical fact was to be observed in the Indian small town."
Behind the fact of this comedy, Narayan presents the poetry of the life of a small town in its entirety. He depicts,

a considerable section of Indian society striving to live its daily life in a definite historical situation... it is not of a few intellectually or emotionally adventurous persons he is talking, but of a more sizeable and static section of Indian society.  

Into this small south Indian town with its orthodox values, the modern civilization enters raising a flutter and disturbing the quiet. As H.M. Williams points out, Malgudi gives Narayan "the necessary fixity of background against which he can set a comedy of deviation and disturbance."  

The title of the short story "Emden" derives itself from a German warship of that name that shelled the Madras Harbour in 1960. The term indicates formidableness and ruthlessness. Even as initially in the story there is an authorial recounting of the many marriages and the large family of the aged eagle, in the later part of the narrative, an account of the unscrupulousness of the youth of Rao is given by means of the device of yet another narrative voice intruding
Jayaraj, the photo-framer, relates to us that Rao has stacked up a lot of wealth by means of his illegal earnings. Hence it is seen that Rao's favourite column is the last page of the newspaper wherein there would be a report on a discourse on reincarnation. It is just an attempt at a hypocritical formulation of the image of the self.

In his attempts to recapitulate and relive his past, Rao browses through his diaries. He reads one of his own notings there: "Too lenient with S. She deserves to be taught a lesson..." This triggers his memory and he now wonders who this S could be. He goes in search of her through the snarl of traffic with a packet of Jilebi in hand. The story ends with an ironic twist. Rao, instead of locating S. and her home, returns home and on the way slips up so that the packet of Jilebi flew from his grip and landed in front of the mongrel, who picked it up and trotted away, wagging his tail in gratitude. Rao looked at the dog helplessly and resumed his journey homeward. Brooding over it, he commented to himself, "Who knows, S. is perhaps in this incarnation now..." (p.244).
Fond as he is of discourses on reincarnation, Rao contents himself with the thought that S. could have reappeared before him in the form of even a mongrel.

As Professor K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar states, Narayan's gifts as a writer are out of the ordinary. Not only does he wield the English language with masterful ease but he is also a master of comedy. Apart from this comic vision informing his writing, Narayan's works reveal an artistic intuition, a feeling for the appropriate gesture, action or attitude or remark whereby a character's individuality is realised.

REFERENCES:


