CHAPTER V

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In the field of Indian Fiction in English, among the three formidable figures — Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao — it is R.K. Narayan who inspires special attention because of his sustained creative output marked by an unswerving dedication to the fictional art. While Mulk Raj Anand committed himself to an exploration of the sociological landscape of India to offer his critique of the social iniquities and injustice, Raja Rao deals with the metaphysical dimension of the Indian ethos and culture. R.K. Narayan, working within the conventional patterns of narratology, tries to forge the subtle links between the old and the new and the pre-colonial society and the post-colonial society. Further, with comic imagination suffusing his narratives, Narayan analyses character, and the illusions and obsessions which govern man. In an interview with Professor William Walsh (BBC Third Programme, 22 February 1968), Narayan said thus about his works:

My main concern is with human character — a central character from whose point of view the world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation, or succumbs to it, or fights it in his own setting.¹
In this Narayan differs from some of the Commonwealth writers like V.S. Naipaul and Wilson Harris who have observed that the novel is the most obvious form for the West Indies writer to express his sense of the newly awakened psyche. The novel alone provides scope, according to them, for structuring the economic and social patterns of living in a post-colonial society. But the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial set-up in the world is not as dramatic or radical in the Indian context as, say, in the African or West Indian community.

Narayan has shown a steady and constant development in the growing canon of his works. He is no doubt a comic ironist whose continuing concern is with the predicament of the individual in a changing, growing society. His ironic but tolerant vision of the absurdities, the foibles, and the touchingly human urges of individuals lends his narratives an irresistible charm which is one of the unique characteristics of Narayan's novels and short stories. This ironic vision has been described by V.S. Naipaul as a contributory factor for the thinness and insubstantiality of Narayan's novels which, he says, are due to the typical Hindu philosophy of quietism and equilibrium that
Narayan finds embodied in his philosophical outlook. But on the other hand there are critics who have commended the solid literary reputation of Narayan. Graham Greene, for example, in her "Introduction" to The Bachelor of Arts and The Financial Expert compares Narayan to Chekhov and admires the Chekhovian way in which Narayan's characters "vanish into life." It is this strain of interest in Narayan's mode of creating character that has appealed to William Walsh who points out that Narayan is "a writer of ... character and maturity." Added to this is Prof. K.R. Srinivasay's cautious observation, made before Narayan had quite emerged with a solid literary reputation, that his gifts as a writer are out of the ordinary and that he is a master of comedy. Narayan is now regarded as one of the foremost novelists and short story writers in India, and he and Raja Rao, whose fictional technique and interests are quite different from each other's, are writers who have in common a profound and discriminating reverence for those ancient traditions which they find to be still culturally and morally vital. It is this discriminating reverence for ancient traditions which gives Narayan his ironic vision with which he captures people and settings reflecting the transition between tradition and modernity.
Though not in the same sense in which Mulk Raj Anand is a dedicated writer, Narayan is a dedicated writer. Anand's vision of life is based on a set of sociopolitical commitments. But Narayan's commitment is to artistic intuition. He places before us the unique traits of a character by drawing on a feeling for the appropriate gesture or attitude or action. Malgudi, the fictional setting for Narayan's stories, gives us a number of examples. One of the main reasons why Narayan is not merely an author of delightful comic entertainments but something more is because in his fiction there is a close correlation between life and art. He is an observer of life in its aspects of fun, sadness, incongruity, irony, absurdity, tenderness, and eccentricity. "An Astrologer's Day" for example analyses the character of the fake astrologer. Narayan uses the Chaucerian mode in giving us an account of the Astrologer through his physiognomical features. The impression the Astrologer makes on Guru Nayak is not due to his knowledge of what the stars foretell, but because the ghost of the past reappears in the present. The reappearance does not lead to a tragic denouement. It frees the Astrologer from a sense of guilt long
oppressing him in a moment when he is face to face with that criminal past from which he ran away. In the Narayan tale the shadows from the past do not perform the function of relentless pursuit as in the case of the avenging Furies. They are, if anything, a redemptive agency provoking the individual to introspection and acknowledgement of guilt. But it is through the vitality of the comic mode that the character is here put on a course of introspection. "Old Bones" is yet another short story where redemption from cold-blooded murder is achieved by an old caretaker of a dak bungalow by means of the Talkative Man's effort at giving a decent burial to the mortal remains of the dead man, Murugesan. In a fine blend of fantasy and popular superstition in a tale revealing guilt, an irrepressible recontreur and a jack of all trades who once bought the municipal statue of Sir Frederick Lawley, the Talkative Man, tells himself that he would not tell the police about Murugesan's murder at least for some time because he would not like to get "mixed up" in a police case which is a whole-time job. Apart from a very realistic observation here, the Narayan world is shown to be one which reveals the inevitability of crime detection.
but one which would not follow a pattern of crime and punishment. It is only Subbiah, the protagonist of "Half a Rupee Worth" who sacrifices himself at the altar of his avarice. And at farthest end to this is the protagonist of "Another Community" whose anxiety to tell a saving lie for avoiding communal holocaust proves futile and ends in his death. His lie, when uttered, would have perhaps saved the situation, but before it could be uttered, "the button did get pressed."^7 The story is an example of the maturity of vision and occasional political wisdom contained in Narayan's short stories and novels. Narayan does not strain at or strive for a particular interpretation of events. The comedy and irony unravel a pattern of meaning. Narayan's is the art of showing, rather than telling. And he does this by means of a tolerant vision of the absurdities and foibles of character so much so that his comedies are elevated into myths, with the central myth being the comedy of being human.^8 Here is where metonymy explodes into myth as at were by the narratology of Narayan.^9 All this in a fictional setting which is not as vast as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha but where the dominant force is "ineluctable fate,
playing one ironic trick after another on the simple inhabitants" and where the cosmos "is blessed with grace, because its people are innocent and comic — copies of Narayan, with his dazzling smile fixed on their faces." Malgudi, with its ancient river Sarayu on the one end and the westernized Lawley Extension on the other, offers a curious blending of traditional India and the modern West which is fundamental to an understanding of character in Narayan. This is epitomized in the spectacle in the novel, The Financial Expert, of Margayya (almost looked upon as a philanthropist by the ignorant) thriving under the banyan tree at the expense of the modern bank across the lawn. Malgudi, for all its smallness, holds the mirror up to a large enough slice of life with all its distinctiveness, cultural and social, and idiosyncracies and failings. And the social history of the fictional setting, Malgudi, offers in a way the miniature social history of South India. Given Narayan's capacity for an intimate portraiture of life and his rootedness in Indian culture, his picture of Malgudi evokes both history and legend and presents it as both a metaphysical idea and a geographical place. Here not the dialect of
Malgudi but the very voice of mankind is heard. It is here that the reverberations of the Independence movement are felt and the ethical values governing the Gandhian movement experienced. The short story "Lawley Road" projects national consciousness and a sense for historical propriety. Woven into this texture is a sense of mistaken identity associated with the statue of Frederick Lawley. Frederick Lawley, as is discovered in the short story, is not the homicidal tyrant of Warren Hastings' time, but an enlightened governor who advocated the withdrawal of the British from India and who built Malgudi on progressive foundations. As the story describes it in terms of a subtle satire on political manouvrering, the Chairman of the municipal council redeems this patriotic blunder in time to ensure his re-election. The Malgudi setting thus illustrates certain aspects of Indian life and the response of the people to the changes taking place in contemporary society. With the typical attribute of detachment as the vein in which the serious issues of life are depicted in comic terms, Narayan refers in his short stories to the limitations of the materialistic way of life, the consequences of disregarding accepted modes of
societal functioning, and such other aspects of the human condition.

Narayan's writing consists of carefully plotted entertainments which contain comments and observations on life. "The Martyr's Curse" is a story in which the Sweet Vendor, Rama, is put out of business because of a riot which breaks out and the resultant consecration the spot where Rama had always set up his stall. "Such is life" seems to be the attitude which Narayan implies. In this short story, martyrdom is looked upon from different angles, and a depth of resonance is given to the story by the use of irony. The story presents a comic inversion of the conventional theme of the rise from rags to riches. It is this irony, as is also found in "Another Community," which makes the short stories of Narayan hold not only the mirror society but also project with detachment a social point of view without the didactic strain getting into the narrative. As V.V.N. Rajendra Prasad says:

The family, sometimes the joint family, is the basic unit of Narayan's Malgudi tales. Most of the protagonists achieve... the sovereign principle of flexibility by passing through the common experiences of life, which constitute the very stuff of comedy."
In addition, Narayan's short stories also shed light on his authorial role. Stories about the story teller like the Talkative Man Stories illustrate aspects of the oral tradition from which Narayan draws his inspiration. The Talkative Man tales are narrated in the first person, a use of point of view which is consistent with Narayan's idea of the Indian society and its communal quality. A characteristic of Narayan's use of this device is that, though the narrator relates invariably a tale of misfortune recollected somewhat vicariously, it is his ironic detachment which gives the tale its distinction. Especially Narayan's blending of the element of fantasy, the realistic, and the superstitious reveal how he belongs to the ancient tradition of the story teller who conceives of his vocation in religious terms. An extract from "Under the Banyan Tree" illustrates the point:

"It is the Mother who gives the gifts; and it is She who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a ______. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. He is dumb when she has nothing 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."
REFERENCES:


