CHAPTER I
R.K. NARAYAN AND HIS WORLD: THE SHORT STORIES

If Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Rabindranath Tagore give Indian fiction its tradition by exploring the moral dimensions of character, R.K. Narayan, prominent Indian novelist in English, gives an added subtlety and a finer touch of irony which are a characteristic hallmark of his style. While considerable attention has been paid to Narayan's novels in general, an attempt would be made in this dissertation at a critical appreciation of his short stories in order to see the typical R.K. Narayan world as adumbrated in them.

R.K. Narayan is an extremely self-effacing writer who says, "I have an extreme distaste of books on myself, and I avoid them. I am frankly puzzled why so many want to write on me, on my books. A novelist must be read (if at all) and not written about, I am happy that you enjoy reading my novels. But why not leave it at that?"¹

In spite of Narayan's disclosure to Ved Mehta that the story, "Breach of Promise,"² is a very truthful autobiographical account³ and in spite
of his memoir My Days mentioning certain delightful childhood and early adulthood anecdotes about him and their fictionalization in Mr. Sampath and Swami and Friends in oft-cited ones such as "The Performing Child." Narayan's stories derive their interest not so much from the device of fictional disguise, which may have partly been employed in some of them, but from the subtle narratological frame in which a blending of the serious and the farcical takes place. Narayan's general refusal to come out with his own biographical details, let alone about the figures behind the fictional characters, indicates that John Updike's observation that "The autobiography of a writer of fiction is generally superfluous, since he has already written out the material of his life many times," is rather on overstatement which needs to be somewhat disregarded in a study of R.K. Narayan. This in spite of The English Teacher, "The White Flower", and "The Seventh House" depicting situations of horoscopes that don't agree and thus adverting perhaps to Narayan's own marriage. The Narayan canon is "not weighted with politics and philosophy nor is it an excuse for communicating a particular Weltanschauung. Also, while some of the
earlier work is autobiographical, there is little room for literary detection or psycho-analytic probes. In the context of the discussion of Narayan's *The Guide*, Ved Mehta says that Narayan has few equals among modern novelists. Though Narayan has received consistent praise from such critics as Graham Greene, according to Ved Mehta, he has not won the general appreciation that he deserves.

In an interview with S.Krishnan, Narayan said thus:

"What a time consuming business writing a novel is. I am tempted to make my next contract for collections of short stories, say four or five at a time, each of about 20,000 words or so. Then I will be rid of this tyranny. In fact, you know... I think I shall give up writing novels altogether." Narayan's first earnings came from a short story published in a Madras Journal, as he recounts in his autobiography, *My Days*. *The Hindu* then published one of his stories. After that *Malgudi Days* (1941), *Dodu and Other Stories* (1943), and *Cyclone and Other Stories*, were published. But these are out of print now, and most of the stories contained...
in these books have been republished in the form of *An Astrologier's Dev and Other Stories* (1947) and *Lawley Road* (1966). *A Horse and Two Goats* (1970) containing five tales, and still later in 1982, a collection entitled *Malgudi Days* appeared. These collections contain some old stories and some new ones as well.

The short story is a leading art form and its form and technique have been undergoing subtle changes over the years. Thanks to the experiments in this form by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and others, the short story has acquired a vibrancy and a challenging distinction. A short story writer like Raja Rao on the Indian scene reveals through his stories how he has an instinctive aversion to the beaten track. Raja Rao's short stories anticipate many prominent features of his novels. His linguistic innovations, his extensive use of myth, his penchant for fantasy, his affinities with the Gandhian movement, and his metaphysical imagination are all seen in embryonic form in his short stories. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the reader ought to be cautious in expecting from Raja Rao's work "The ingredients of a familiar literary genre."
C.V. Venugopal places Raja Rao among the top ranking story writers in English and directs our attention to Raja Rao's presentation of the impact of the cultural heritage of India and to the intimate and comprehensive picture of the rural India of the 1930s and 1940s depicted in his work.16

While Raja Rao has perhaps preferred the limitless freedom offered by the novel to the limited scope of the short story, especially for his mythic unfolding, R.K.Narayan, as he explained in the interview cited earlier, seems to prefer the short story for its usefulness to his creative purposes from the point of view of revealing filigree work on a bit of ivory as it were, in the manner of a novelist like Jane Austen.

A number of the stories of R.K.Narayan depend upon the element of recognition rather than on surprise. As an example may be cited the story entitled "An Astrologer's Day". The opening passage of the story describes the physiognomical features of the Astrologer as he wound round his head a saffron coloured turban so that "people were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks."17
The subject matter of An Astrologer's Day and Lawley Road include the artist and the society, the effects of cinema on individual life, and a variety of contemporary realities. The short story entitled "Fortyfive a Month" from An Astrologer's Day depicts the transactions in the life of Venkat Rao. He was so deeply dissatisfied with the conditions of his employment that he almost reaches the threshold of rebellion. But, disconcertingly indeed, he is inescapably ensnared in the system.

Venkat Rao, however, was forced to go back to work on the day that he finally decided to take his daughter to the cinema. The infuriated Venkat Rao writes down an indictment of the management by way of tendering his resignation. But as he is about to hand over his letter of resignation, the manager tells him that he has been granted a five-rupee increment. With this he meekly does the over-time and returns home late to find his daughter asleep, with the frock which she wore getting crumpled. This, according to S.C. Harrex, represents the epitomising of remorseless social power which forces Venkat Rao to hurt those he wants to please.18 This
point is suggested by the irony of the final sentence in the story:

"I don't know if it is going to be possible for me to take her out at all — you see, they are giving me an increment —." The increment Venkat Rao so badly needed almost enchained him to the commitments of the profession to the detriment of the fulfilment of his emotional urges and aspirations.

A characteristic of Narayan's short stories is that he uses the first person point of view mode of narration. The narrator invariably relates a tale of misfortune, and judiciously a tone of ironic detachment is preserved in the narrative.

Narayan writes with complete objectivity and there is a mixture of humour and irony in his writing as he unfolds the oddities and angularities of character. One of the qualities of Narayan's language is that humour is woven into the texture of his prose. While Mulk Raj Anand deals with the plight of the working classes and makes his language an instrument of the expression of fury against the inequalities heaped upon the downtrodden, Narayan depicts the meanness and morals of town life in such a way that a concept of comedy evolves in his writing.
An added vitality is gained by his narratives by means of the attention he bestows on topographical details. An intimate sense of play and a lack of hiatus between character and plot are the components of Narayan's comedy.

An examination of the trends in the short story form would reveal that in general it has similarities of form and pattern with the ancient Indian tale. The Indian writer, however, knows only too well that aiming at an explicit moral is not in tune with the twentieth century ethos. However, a writer would like to introduce a moral tone which gives his tale an angle of vision. Mulk Raj Anand uses humanism in place of didacticism for castigating the evils of social injustice in society. Raja Rao uses satire directly as in "Javni," or by implication, as in "Kanakapala," to comment on the social and individual short-comings in contemporary India. Narayan exposes, in a story like "Lawley Road," the hypocrisy, clumsiness of legislators. In yet another short story, "White Flower," Narayan offers a subtle and humorous ridiculing of the average Indians steeping themselves in superstitious practices. While the ancient Indian story emphasised universal human values through the
devices of allegory and fantasy, the modern Indian short story depicts the contemporary human situation in all its ludicrity or pathos or tragedy. R.K.Narayan's skill lies in developing a narrator who focuses on "sharply featured scenes and characters." 20

If Raja Rao's short stories (The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories)21 deal with a locale that is rural south India depicting village life and the impact of the Freedom Movement on it, R.K.Narayan restricts his locale to the imaginary Malgudi. His purpose is to give his readers delight tempered with an invisible moral tone. He is not interested in psychological analysis of character. The darker aspects of life are beyond his province. Narayan looks at life with a detachment which enables him to appreciate and vividly sketch the lighter side of life with a sense of humour. The fun which he creates in his novels or short stories is such that he reveals his gift for minute observation blended with delightful satire. It is this capacity for drawing out of every situation a universally admired humourous proportion that gives Narayan's short stories their vitality and their artistry.
While some of the stories of Raja Rao reflect the political unrest of a period and project the deep and abiding influence of Gandhi in the remotest corners of the country, Narayan uses either the political unrest or the Gandhian influence as a subtle, almost invisible, backdrop in some of his stories. Raja Rao's Narsingha is a symbol of the deep influence of Gandhi mysteriously working its way through the hearts of men. In the story "In Khandesh," Raja Rao hints at the defunct feudal system and also reacts against the expectations of loyalty of the British Raj. C.V. Venugopal, M.K. Naik, C.D. Narasimhaiah and H.M. Williams have explored the themes of Raja Rao's stories and have shown how he employs the mythological framework, and even the stream of consciousness technique (as in a story like "In Khandesh"). Compared to Raja Rao's short stories, Narayan's short stories are as varied as life itself. For example, in "Lawley Road" blind patriotic enthusiasm is the subject matter of the story. "Green Blazer" and "Half a Rupee Worth" deal with an honest pick-pocket and a black marketeer respectively. "An Astrologer's Day" portrays a fake astrologer desperately trying to save his skin. And
in a story like "The Shelter" a couple's inability to adjust themselves to each other and the resulting domestic disharmony is the subject matter. Thus R.K. Narayan deals tenderly with a series of human situations in which his comic imagination is at work. Coupled with his comic imagination is Narayan's gift for racy narration and engaging style. While Raja Rao seems to believe that, implicit in the continuing odyssey of the fictional artist, is a vision that can invest people and landscape with a spiritual dimension, R.K. Narayan's attempt is to bring home to the reader "The crowded jostling life of the Indian Bazaar, and short and simple annals of the Indian poor." It is this which Vikram Seth admires in R.K. Narayan when he says, "... my favourite Indian writer is R.K. Narayan. And there again, he creates a world. I cannot tell you how much I admire that, that ... ability. Sometimes it's so easy to be brilliant in language... I won't say it's so easy, it's a lesser talent to be brilliant in language than to create a world and to have characters who can interest and move you."
REFERENCES:


