CHAPTER III
THE TALKATIVE MAN STORIES
CHAPTER III

THE TALKATIVE MAN STORIES

In the collections, Lawley Road and Other Stories and An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories, there are about nine stories narrated by the same person called the Talkative Man. The stories are "The Roman Image," "The Tiger's Claw," "A Career," "The Snake Song," "Engine-Trouble," "Lawley Road," and "A Night of Cyclone," and so on. These stories were not all written at the same time but they are grouped together because they have a common narrator offering an exposition of a given situation by means of an ironic detachment.

A generalization which can be made about Narayan's short stories and novels in general is that they refer to the social and moral codes of the typical Indian society. These stories may be cited as a fine example of the Malgudi comedy which underlines "traditional Indian belief in the ultimate integration."¹ L.J. Potts, in his account of comedy's inalienable link with the social sense, points out that in a comedy a compelling tendency on the part of the individual is to seek integration with the life of his society: "The conviction that the
individual is unimportant except as a part of something wider; the impulse to mix, and to seek common ground with the rest of one's kind..."² is part of the comic strain. Narayan's world of comedy reinforces the suggestion that the social sense is the dominant characteristic of the Narayan tale. This social sense manifests itself in the narrative in terms of an upholding of a social consciousness rooted in traditional morality which allows scope for a subtle play upon human frailties. The universe of this setting is Malgudi which, as H.M. Williams has rightly observed, is "relatively free from the terrible privations and agonies, political conflicts and economic depression of Anand's India."³ Again, as H.M. Williams says, Malgudi life gives Narayan the background against which he can set his comedy of deviation.⁴ It is against this setting that the Talkative Man stories are placed and they are based on themes and situations which are familiar, improbable and far-fetched. An exception to this thematic pattern is "A Career" in which there is a tendency towards drawing a moral conclusion. Narayan's stories in general imply a moral, rather than explicitly state one. The other Talkative Man stories follow this
pattern and reveal the sheer delight in story telling which the endlessly resourceful narrator, the Talkative Man, shows a clear propensity for. One of the characteristics of the Talkative Man's mode of narration is that exaggeration, the element of fantasy and entertainment are all built into his framework. The Talkative Man gleans knowledge of miscellaneous matters in the world including the world of trade, archaeology, and music. This breadth of experience gives his stories a special appeal and shows the narrator to be a 
reconteur. As R.A. Jayantha has rightly observed, in the Talkative Man, "Narayan has created and immortalised a universal type, familiar particularly to any unhurried and leisurely society, rural and suburban, in which there are people eager to listen to tales and anecdotes and therefore there are tellers of tales." 

"The Roman Image" is an interesting short story in which the Talkative Man recounts to the reader in first person narration his experience years ago when he was an assistant to an archaeologist. One of the attributes of this short story is that in the typical Narayan way there is a humourous
dig at archaeological activity in general. The archeologist is not named. He is not given an identity other than that of an amusing archaeologist. The profession is called that of "gravediggers." The archaeologist found Malgudi "eminently diggable." It is as though he is launched on the exercise of discovering a buried city under the mound of earth of the Malgudi district with a zeal for pushing the earliest known civilization three centuries antiquity. He is thus a rival of the discoverers of Mohenzadaro. In this story, the Talkative Man has a greater identity than the "Doctor." The Roman image referred to is a piece of temple architecture with an arm, an eye, the nose, and the mouth missing in it. The Talkative Man stumbles upon it in the river Sarayu. The archeologist identifies it as a piece belonging to the Roman empire under the reign of Tiberius II. This discovery leads him to go on an advertising spree. Narayan here scoffs at the self-promotional and pompously parading instincts of pseudo-scholars of the present day. In fact, the image has not even the remotest connection with Roman history. This tale is revealed, in a narrative within a narrative, ironically indeed, by
a rustic who could relate bare facts as he knew them at first hand. The rustic reveals to the Talkative Man the tale of a temple priest who was a confirmed alcoholic. The fact of the priest being an alcoholic falls in line with the pattern of the spinning of yarn set in motion already in the narrative by the Talkative Man. The vision of the improbable conjured up by the priest's behaviour is strengthened by the Talkative Man who starts with the possibility of an exciting discovery but moves on to the ridiculous suggestion that the image is not Roman but native to the soil of Malgudi. A touch of exaggeration, an eccentricity are given to the Talkative Man's account of the archaeological expedition in order that it conforms to the overall pattern of exaggeration in the narrative offered by the rustic about the possible dumping of the image in the river by the priest himself. The rustic's tale, with its characteristic downrightness, exposes the fantastic claims made by the Talkative Man and the archaeologist so that the only course of action left open for the Doctor and the Talkative Man was to burn their research finding and then to consign "the Roman Image" to its original place in the watery grave. The Talkative Man recognizes
that he has been made a fool of by the rustic's tale and by his own visions of grandeur. This recognition on the part of the narrator wins for him sympathy in the reader's judgement. Thus in the creative process, the comic possibilities gain the upper hand over the satirical possibility of having a dig at antiquarians. This is the impact of the delightful yarn of the Talkative Man. 7

I had never seen him in such a rage before. I wrapped the image in a piece of brown paper, carried it to the sea-shore, and flung it far into the sea. I hope it is still rolling about at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. I only hope it won't get into some large fish and come back to the study table! Later a brief message appeared in all the important papers: "The manuscript on which Doctor - and assistant were engaged has been destroyed, and the work will be suspended."8

"The Tiger's Claw" is another short story narrated by the Talkative Man. It reveals the Talkative Man's gift for dramatizing his narration. The tale given by him is yet another instance of one
revealing sheer inventiveness and a capacity for playing upon the susceptibilities of the listener. As in "The Roman Image," even here at the end of the story there is a sudden reduction of the heroic proportions of the Talkative Man's account of his encounter with a tiger and the tokens of that encounter which the tiger's dead body still bears as proof of the Talkative Man's brave fight with it:

The man who cut it off must have driven his knife with the power of a hammer. To a question, the hunters replied, "Can't say how it happens. We've met a few instances like this. It's said that some forest tribes, if they catch a tiger cub, cut off its claws for some talisman and let it go. They do not usually kill cubs."  

The story starts with an omniscient narrator describing a village procession in which the killers of a tiger are garlanded and paraded in the streets along with their prize trophy, the tiger, which held a reign of terror for nearly five years. As the procession watched by a passionate crowd drifts along, the Talkative Man comes from behind
and assures the village folk witnessing this spectacle that it was with this tiger that he once had a lone encounter, without guns and other accoutrements. He casts himself now in the role of an agent of a fertilizer company. In one of his journeys across the forest ranges for popularising his brand of the fertilizer, he comes to a remote, almost unvisited village whose only centre of civilization was its improvised railway station. The railway station was not a building but an abandoned railway carriage which is the scene of the encounter with the tiger. Narayan gives ample suggestion of the unsafe surroundings of the place. The Talkative Man says that he was warned not to sleep on the platform: "No, no, these are very bad parts. Not like your town. Full of tigers..." the station-master said" (p.40). The Talkative Man therefore is lodged for the night in the station-master's office, that is, the discarded railway carriage.

The Talkative Man gives a detailed description of how the tiger entered the railway carriage. In fact, the tiger came when he was dreaming of "Catlike in size but full-grown tigers" (p.41). The dream shatters into reality and for a muddled moment
the Talkative Man was not sure whether he was awake or whether the dream was continuing. When he realizes that it was a real tiger he was face to face with, the Talkative Man indulges not only in self-pity but also in a demonstration of his fighting spirit. From dream to reality there is a sudden transition. The tradition here is of a narrative within a narrative, as in "The Roman Image" which unfolds a spectacle of heroism revealing ultimately the fact that the so called heroism or unearthing of remote history is in fact no more than an ingenious conception or fabulation. The Talkative Man builds up an element of high drama, and even humour, in his description of the moves and the counter-moves he and the tiger both make in the encounter. What is strikingly clear is that the supposed fight is patently absurd. A subtle use of the language of exaggeration lends the description an air of probability. The Talkative Man's account is so absorbing that it carries with it the resonance of truth so that it can be argued that the listeners show an indication to believe in his account. That he is perhaps fooling them is noticed only towards the close when the hunters explain a possible reason for the missing toes of the tiger. The hunter's
explanation does have a capacity to carry conviction with the people at large because their version is based upon the folk superstition that tribesmen use the claws of a tiger cub as a talisman. The conclusion to this story enlivens the whole Malgudi background recreated in story after story vividly by Narayan such that communal living, faith in folk tale, folk customs, popular superstitions are shown as the fibres out of which the Malgudi fictional carpet is woven. It is here that the Narayan tale can be seen to have a kinship with the *Jataka tales*, as C.V. Venugopal suggests. But as R.A. Jayantha rightly points out, Narayan's narrator is more a universal type belonging to the long established tradition of oral narration. However, Narayan's stories do not represent variations in technique. The narrative mode becomes familiar when we examine a series of short stories so that the element of surprise on which the success of a story depends is seen to be less exciting.

Even within a stereotypicality, there are certain tales which invoke an atmosphere of the mysterious and the supernatural. If Malgudi environment is often drawn upon in many stories, there are
some in which popular and folk imagination becomes the integral part of the narrative. Even here the ironic mode is still perceptible, but the delight in anecdotage is combined with a fictional technique which, through sheer narrative resourcefulness, renders credible the improbable and the incredible. In the story, "The Snake Song," The Talkative Man spins a tale round his interest in music. In this tale there is a movement from a description of an actual encounter with a Sadhu to a world of fantasy:

Song after song flowed from that tiny bamboo and transformed my lonely cottage. I was no longer a petty mortal blowing through a piece of bamboo. I was among the gods. The lantern on the wall became a brilliant star illuminating a celestial hall.... And I came to the snake-song in Punnaga Varali. 12

From the world of fancy again there is a sudden jump into the world of reality. In the moment of the dawning of truth on himself, the Talkative Man still pursues the idea of his song with the real cobra appearing at his door step and listening intently to the punnaga varali. The whole story gives the impression
of the narrator's movement from a higher illusion in which he is stationed in the very heavens to a lower illusion in which a snake is enraptured by the music of the bamboo flute. Narayan exploits the popular superstitious notion that music makes an impact on the snakes. Initially the snake appears so dignified and commanding that the Talkative Man tells himself thus: "Which God would forgo the privilege of wearing this in His hair? .... "

The snake itself is described by the Talkative Man as so demanding that it lets out a terrible hiss whenever he attempted to change the tune. After playing this tune on the flute repeatedly till he totally exhausts himself, the Talkative Man flings the flute down and desperately cries out in agony that he would rather allow himself to be killed by the snake than play on the flute any more. Next day he narrates this experience to his master who chides him for playing punnaga varali at night and tells him to throw away his flute and forget his music. Then the Talkative Man realises that the words of the Sadhu to whom he denied a morsel of food come prophetically true. As the Talkative Man relates his story
to the people at the music concert, he attempts to make credible the incredible ingredients of his narrative. Both the Sadhu's prophetic utterance and the ravishment to which a raga has subjected a snake belong to the realm of the improbable and the Talkative Man has the typical Narayan gift of engrossing his listeners in such a tale. Here is a tale which is woven out of visions of fancy. It suggests how the Talkative Man in his role as a lover of music and a musician himself had to arrive at renunciation because of the effect of a mandicant's curse. The world of fancy invoked and the touch of exaggeration in language and the imaginative construction of an aura also vaguely hint at Narayan's unequivocal commitment to the world of reality as different from the world of superstitious belief. This is suggested by the way Narayan describes how the Talkative Man's stay has been forced upon the people: "We tried to snub him by receiving his remarks in cold silence and talking among ourselves. But he followed us all the way, chatting, and we had to listen to him" (p.63).

"Lawley Road" is an important story in the Narayan canon for two reasons: It is a story told
by the Talkative Man which builds up an effect of fantasy in its mode of narration. It is further a subtly ironic account of the patriotic zeal which burst forth at the declaration of Independence so that a new frenzy for the re-naming of historic monuments brought in with it a tendency to desecrate the long lasting and thereby pave the way for a total descretion of values in future, as the Indian political scene has witnessed in an abundant measure.

In "Lawley Road" and "Engine Trouble" there is a good deal of satire on contemporary political depravities. The Talkative Man recounts in this story the post-Independence craze for the re-naming of roads and the erection of national monuments to commemorate the leaders of the Freedom Movement. Pseudo-patriotic fervour in a nascent democracy is the subject matter of this short story as it relates a case of mistaken identity in the process which gives rise to the creation of comedy and pathos. The tale has all the trappings of fantasy. The satire here is very pronounced where the Talkative Man tells of the swift change brought about in the town where roads have all been renamed indiscriminately.
He refers to how confusion is worse confounded:
"The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone." This situation of confusion worse confounded is accentuated when it comes to the statue of Lawley. Just as in the short story, "The Roman Image," Doctor commits a mistake in his archaeological assessment of the antiquity of the temple idol, so also there is a mistaken identity attributed to the massive statue adorning the corner of Lawley Extension and the Market. The whole description relating to the mistaken identity reveals Narayan's gift for introducing an element of the ludicrous in the narrative. The statue, used by birds as a perch, is discovered to be that of Sir Frederick Lawley, whose history reveals his dictatorial tendency. His craftiness reminds one of Machiavelli. In the new patriotic fervour of the people, these appeared to be qualities for which the statue ought to be removed because Malgudi was expected to unveil a new chapter in the history of modern India. After patriotic passions have been sufficiently roused, ironically indeed, it was discovered that the statue was that of a military Governor who was one of the founding fathers of Malgudi town.

This is a sudden recognition entailing a reversal of the situation. There were public
demonstrations in front of the Talkative Man's house where the statue was safely lodged, though with great difficulty. People are now in an equal frenzy for the restoration of the statue. The issue finally gets solved after bewildering legalities with the government dissolving the municipality on grounds of corruption. With fresh elections round the corner, the Chairman of the Municipality plays an invidious trick on the people by buying the statue and presenting it as a gift to the nation. There is here a subtle but devastating satire on political opportunism. Kabir Lane now becomes Lawley Road, thanks to the historical sense people show. This is a story in which the Talkative Man provides the narrative framework not only for an indignant attitude towards the politician but also for an ingenious anticipation of the modalities of future political functioning.

"Engine Trouble" traces the story of winning a road engine as a prize and facing the consequences. This is another story where an element of fantasy is deftly built into the narrative. That the Road Engine could be offered as a prize is an improbability is explained by the Talkative Man thus:
Don't ask me how a road engine came to be included among the prizes. It is more than I can tell you.15

The short story introduces other improbabilities as well. In addition to satirizing municipalities, the story introduces a Swamiji whose yogic feats and message to the people are referred to in terms ironic. The image of the Swamiji which Narayan gives in this short story corresponds to other images of the Swamiji obtaining in the novels such as The Guide. The whole circumstance relating to the acquisition and the disposal of the Road Engine reveals a touch of the ludicrous. It is a comic-pathetic account of how a Road Engine could be a burden rather than a prize. The culmination of the story is to be found not in the massive metal structure mounting on the chest of the yogic master and thereby earning for itself glory as a piece of earthly accoutrement at the disposal of yogic powers but in its becoming an instrument in a providential design of good riddance for the owner and a convenient cork to cap a well in disuse so that both the owner of the well and the prize winner would escape the wrath of the municipality. For the story the final comic resolution is provided by the
earthquake: "When I again passed that way some months later I peeped over the wall. I found the mouth of the well neatly cemented up. I heaved a sigh of great relief" (p. 73).

Two more short stories, "Old Man of the Temple" and "Old Bones" deal, like "The Snake-Song," with the mysterious and the supernatural. Though in these stories Narayan's ironic attitude shows forth, nevertheless the element of the supernatural gives these stories their popular appeal because they draw upon, for their fictional possibilities, popular superstitions, faith, and imagination. The Talkative Man is the narrator of these stories. In these stories he attempts to render credible to his audience the incredible and the mysterious. In "Old Man of the Temple" the narrator refers to the story he is going to narrate and says that it happened some years ago and that it has a mysterious aura about it. In this story, the Talkative Man encounters the ghost of the old man of the temple. He builds up the readers' sense of anticipation and tries to give a touch of the matter of fact to his account. By means of a stress on the "perfect judgement, good sense, and sobriety," the Talkative Man drives home to
his readers that the ghost of the Old Man is not an illusory image entertained in the mind by superstitious men. Then he deftly builds up the atmosphere appropriate to the meeting with the ghost:

It was about eleven when we passed the village Koopal... It was the dark half of the month and the surrounding country was swallowed up in the night. The village street was deserted. Everyone had gone to sleep; hardly any light was to be seen. The stars overhead sparkled brightly. Sitting in the back seat and listening to the continuous noise of the running wheels, I was half lulled into a drowse.

All of a sudden Doss swerved the car and shouted: "You old fool! Do you want to kill yourself?" (pp.156-157).

The roadside temple, from where Doss sees the old orphan coming out, is just a ruin and is suitable for creating an unearthly atmosphere around it. When Doss next says that the Old Man is sitting next to him in the car and wants a lift, the narrator suspects that Doss is under the influence of drink. But soon it is found that Doss not only assumes the
posture of the old man but speaks in his voice. From the conversation between himself and the spirit that possesses Doss, the Talkative Man gets details of the Old Man's antecedents. Somehow the Talkative Man is able to persuade the Old Man not to haunt the village any more but to go back to union with his dead wife. Thus the Talkative Man exorcises the haunting ghost from the village by means of his powers of persuasion. As he talks about this in the narrative, he gives the supernatural event an air of credibility because of his convincing anecdote.

The story ends thus, still stressing that the supernatural visitation could have a ring of credibility about it:

It proved correct. When I passed that way again months later I was told that the bullocks passing the temple after dusk never shied now and no knocking on doors was heard at nights. So I felt that the old fellow had really gone away with his good wife. (p. 163)

The story "Old Bones" relates yet another of the Talkative Man's fibs about spirits possessing men. This is a story in which the Talkative Man
offers no excuses and attempts to convince the reader about the credibility of his incredible narrative. In this story there is a straightforward narration building up a sustained tempo. After a brief discussion in a deserted bungalow in which the event described takes place, the Talkative Man builds up a sense of dread in his nephew as though to give a backdrop to his tale. At midnight, after the village noises have ceased to come floating in the air, the Talkative Man discovers that the young nephew has been possessed by a spirit. The boy, Raju, shows fierce energy and gruff adult voice which frighten the old man out of his wits. The spirit in him reveals its tale of woe and says that underneath the tamarind tree its bones lay unhonoured and defiled. The spirit of Murugesan also reveals that Murugesan's death was due to suffocation he was subjected to by the caretaker of the bungalow. The spirit further tells the Talkative Man that if his buried bones are immersed in the waters of the nearby well he would discard the body of Raju.

The episode has all the dimensions of an agreement reached between two contracting parties in a mundane earthly situation. Finally, when the
Talkative Man flings the bones of the spirit possessing Raju into the well, the spirit gives up its earthly haunt. The result of the encounter with the spirit is that the Talkative Man knows about a tale of gruesome murder which he decides to keep to himself. This part of the narrative shows a brilliant contrast between the Talkative Man's tense moments with the spirit and his present prudence not to get involved:

Till I reached the bus road I debated within myself whether to tell the police, but ultimately decided against it. I am a busy man, and getting mixed up in a police case is a whole-time job. Some day when I don't have much work I will take it up. 17

The story "Old Bones" thus not only alternates in its narrative strategy between the realistic and the improbable but also derives its key suggestion from the ancient Indian belief in the due performance of the rites for the dead.

The short story entitled "A Career" does not deal with the supernatural and the mysterious.
It moves away from the realm of fantasy and gives us an account of human gullibility and folly. It raises the theme of retributive justice but dissolves it in the warm, forgiving humanity in which Narayan diffuses his narratives. In this story, the Talkative Man casts himself in the role of a petty shopkeeper who trusts a young boy named Ramu who comes to him for "a little food and shelter and kindness." Typical again of the Narayan tale, here is a story in which the dot of vermilion on the forehead indicates deceptive appearances. Here is a description of the young fellow:

There was something in the young fellow's personality which appealed to me. Moreover, he had on his forehead three-finger width of sacred ash and a dot of vermilion between his eyebrows. He looked as if he had just come from a temple.

"Iam very God-fearing, sir, and susceptible to religious influences" (p.116)

The description cited above hints at the possibility of deception which Ramu exercises on the Talkative Man after initially winning his trust. Affected by small pox, turning blind as a result,
and deserted by his wife, Ramu turns a beggar, and about ten years later when the Talkative Man hears his familiar voice on the foot-steps of Thirupati hills, he is no longer filled with revenge. Revenge is over-powered by a feeling of deep compassion even for the betrayer of trust. The story is a straightforward narration in which neither is there an attempt at sentimentalising nor an effort on the part of the Talkative Man to project his humanity. While in other stories the Talkative Man speaks in general with a sense of assurance and exaggerated importance of his own self, in this short story, the narrative is shorn of the typical character traits of the Talkative Man, as Narayan would generally present him to be. Again "A Career" is a short story which offers anticipations of the familiar theme of the sacred guise and the ripping open of the mask.

The characteristic traits of the garrulity of the Talkative Man are seen in the short story "A Night of Cyclone." In this story, there is a recounting on the part of the Talkative Man of a fib concerning the birth of his son. As a background to this, he invents a severe cyclonic storm. This
is a story in which, according to R.A. Jayantha, the Talkative Man's garrulity and his weakness for the fantastic tempt him to some overdoing in the narrative, particularly in his account of his adventures in the storm. Therefore his trick of producing his son at the end of the story as proof of the truth of the story does not make as successful an impact as a similar trick he uses in "Tiger's Claw." 

The Talkative Man stories, taken together, introduce the Talkative Man as a protagonist-narrator and provide considerable variety in terms of the use of anecdotage, elements of fantasy, the supernatural, and even the anticipations offered of the familiar Narayan themes considered in an expanded form in the novels. Above all, these stories reveal Narayan's capacity to invest the Talkative Man with a power of fertile imagination whereby the incredible is brought within the realm of the seemingly credible through a subtle manipulation of the reader's response.
REFERENCES:


