The Short Stories of R.K.Narayan

"The only test of fiction is its readability"¹ Narayan has said. If this standard is applied to his own stories, doubtless he would emerge somewhere at the top of the chart for, his stories, having a wide variety of themes ranging from school boy cunning to a child's disappointments, from the daily routine of a clerk to a roadside astrologer, from ambitions to insanity, are gripping in themselves; in addition to this, the reader finds a kaleidoscopically changing panorama of the ludicrous, the fantastic and the ironical aspects of human life; always however, coloured with tolerant sympathy, which has made Narayan one of the most widely read authors this side of the British Commonwealth. William Walsh has high praise for Narayan's art: "Narayan's fastidious art, blending exact realism, poetic myth, sadness, perception and gaiety, is without precedent in literature in English and, as far as one can see, without following ... It carries along with it at every point a kind of humour strange in English writing which mixes the melancholy and the amusing. Perhaps it is in this humour that there lies its deepest wisdom, which communicates a sense, crisp and unrebellious, of human limitation, and an appreciation, positively amiable but without illusion, of human achievement."²

Most of Narayan's stories first appeared in *The Hindu* and they represent the "fictional documentation of Narayan's life as a reporter." 3 Says Narayan, "I get all influence from life, from the surroundings, a little bus-stop, or a street-shop." 4

Indeed, Narayan sees the vastness and infinity of the whole picture of life through tracing a small facet of daily life to its origin; this is made clear in one of his novels where the character Srinivas is half-asleep, half-awake:

"Mixed sounds reached him—his wife in the kitchen, his son's voice far off, arguing with a friend, the clamour of assertions and appeals at the water-tap, a pedlar woman crying "Brinjals and greens" in the street... following each one to its root and source, one could trace it to a human aspiration and outlook. "The vegetable seller is crying because in his background is her home and children whose welfare is moulded by the amount of brinjals she is able to scatter into society... some old man very fond of them, some schoolboy making a wry face, the housewife... seeing in the crier a welcome solution to her problems of housekeeping..."

3. Ibid., p. 95.
What great human forces meet and come to grips with each other between every sunrise and sunset.  

The innumerable themes of his stories are evidently born out of this keen observation and an uncanny eye for detail—presenting familiar pictures of the family, the neighbourhood, or the street-corner. Some of his stories deal with the supernatural, e.g., 'Old Bones,' 'Old Man of the Temple,' and a few others. While some are humorous tales, like 'Attila,' most deal with the delicate fabric of human relationships: the deceitful old family retainer in 'A Snake in the Grass,' the love for 'Uncle' even through blind spots of incomprehension, the danger of blind trust in 'A Career' and a host of others. But all the stories have the singular comic touch of the master.

III

The Indian English short story reached its zenith with the political, social and ideological waves of the post 1920s. While the best contributions were made by novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, others like Shankar Ram and K.A. Abbas are almost exclusively short story writers. A comparison with his two stalwart contemporaries Anand and Raja Rao would illuminate better Narayan's characteristics as a writer.

5. Narayan, Mr. Sampath, Eyre and Spottiswoode, Norwich, 1949, p.49.
Mulk Raj Anand's almost militant humanism in characterization, stark realistic treatment and a plenitude of rustic proverbs, turns of expression and even swear words are in direct contrast to the quiet realism and quieter humour of Narayan. The themes in Anand's stories are the complex social factors in India like feudalism or capitalism as in 'A Kashmir Idyll', and the clash between the ancient and the modern as in 'The Barbers' Trade Union'. Some of his stories are universal in spirit; for example - 'The Lost Child' relates the traumatic experience of a child who gets separated from his parents at a country fair; while some are limited to the dark side of Indian society, as in 'The Hiccup' where a mother-in-law deliberately serves ghee parathas to her daughter-in-law fully knowing that she can't stand them. The young girl suppresses her distaste, and gets hiccups and she tries to suppress them too, chokes and dies. His characters too, are gleaned from all sections of society, and his narrative techniques also vary: from the fable, the parable and the traditional narration to the modern stream of consciousness techniques.

Raja Rao on the other hand has not produced a large number of stories, but the few that he has exhibit diverse themes such as the Gandhian theme ('A cow of the Barricades'), Hindu widowhood ('Javni'), and the confrontation between the
east and the west ('Nimka'). He employs the traditional manner, - a grandmother is usually the narrator, and in his recent stories (e.g. 'The Policeman and the Rose'), there is a larger sense of the metaphysical than before. Raja Rao captures the Indian village scene vividly with his Harikatha style and the literal translation of rustic nicknames; one remembers such characters as Widow Kenchi, Corner House Ranga, Plantation Subbayya etc. In this he emulates Shankar Ram, one of the early Indian English writers. Raja Rao made use of this device to better effect.

Narayan, in direct contrast, is simply the storyteller as story-teller: content to skim on the surface of the pool of life like a kingfisher. He also says: "To be a good writer anywhere you must have roots - both in religion and in family. I have these things." We find even in his fiction an inclination to family and domestic life and an aversion to bookish scholarship. C.N. Srinath feels:

"If Narayan does not believe in any systematic and critical study of his own work it is because he as a storyteller or the bhagavataar, the traditional Indian storyteller the of his own essay "The World of/Story-teller," expects an instant response from his audience to his stories or descriptions.

6. The pet-name of T.L. Natesan
of a puranic character and incident."^8

IV

It is Stendhal's axiom that a story is a mirror walking down a road, and that clarification of character progresses with the movement of the story. This certainly holds true in the case of Narayan. He uses the Western technique of landing the reader plumb in the midst of the locale and the characters. Here are some typical beginnings:

"Venkat Rao, Shanta's father, was about to start for his office that morning when a jutka passed along the street distributing cinema handbills. Shanta dashed to the street and picked up a handbill. She held it up and asked: "Father will you take me to the cinema tomorrow?"^9

('Forty Five a Month')

"Krishna ran his finger over the block of ice in order to wipe away the layer of sawdust, chiselled off a piece, crushed it and filled the rubber ice-bag. This activity in the shaded corner of the back verandah gave him an excuse to get away from the sickroom, but he could not dawdle over it, for he had to keep the ice cap on his wife's brow continuously, according to the doctor's command."^10

('Seventh House')

'Narayan is also wonderfully skillful at creating suspense and building up anticipation in the reader, making him thirst for more, as in 'The Evening Gift'. The opening sentence talks of a "curious occupation" but in the next ten sentences Narayan seems to be deliberately withholding further information.

'He had a most curious occupation in life. Having failed in every effort he had to accept it with gratitude and enthusiasm; he received thirty rupees a month for it. He lived on fifteen rupees in a cheap hotel, where he was given a sort of bunk on the loft... '11

('Evening Gift')

The 'genus' or derivation of humour lies in the culture of a society: it includes the social and historical facts which most of the readers can be assumed to know; the customary patterns of behaviour, the dominant often traditional, attitudes, prejudices, types and so on. For example, the retired gate- man's temporary insanity on receiving a registered parcel may seem incomprehensible to a foreigner, but in India where even a letter is a matter of family and neighbourhood gossip, and the mere delivery of a telegram gives rise to wails of sorrow and fear, the implications of a letter, that too a registered one, and from the highest officer in the bank is enough to cause worry and tension:

'His voice choked as he replied: "It has come." He flung at her the registered letter. "What is it?" she asked. He said, "How should I know? Perhaps our ruin..." He broke down.'

('Gatesman's Gift')

Humour is more easily shared with those who understand one's way of interpreting experience.

The technique of Narayan's stories is clearly influenced by those of the English writers in magazines that Narayan was familiar with in the 1920's and 30's; writers like Conan Doyle, W.W. Jacobs, Arnold Bennett and P.G. Wodehouse.

The endings of his stories follow logically, but sometimes they "peter out in a tame and dull manner, more disappointing than shocking." In 'Fellow Feeling' for example, the protagonist Rajan Iyer is insulted by a bully and he retaliates with a bizarre threat:

'I will slap your right cheek and at the same time tag your left ear, and your mouth, which is now under your nose, will suddenly find itself under your left ear, and what is more, stay there.'

('Fellow Feeling')

And the bully is so frightened that he keeps his head out of the window till the next station, whereupon he jumps out of the train and moves away at a furious pace. Rajam lies to the other passengers that the bully has got into another compartment.

Such endings give the reader a mental jolt; it's like descending suddenly on a step—which isn't there.

However, in other stories, the author does follow up the promise of the wonderful beginning and produce such gems in Indian English literature as 'Missing Mail', 'Such Perfection' and 'The Axe'. In the last named story, an old gardener walks away, with bleeding heart, from the garden which he has tended with such loving care, in order not to hear the sound of trees being cut down:

'The tree-cutters squatted on the ground and watched the old man go. Nearly half an hour later his voice came from a distance, half indistinctly, "Don't cut yet. I am still within hearing. Please wait till I am gone further."'

('The Axe')

In delineating his characters, Narayan had to rely on his own self-analysis and understanding of the person. Very often, he sketches the character in a few lines, and only a

secondary reading shows us that his description is mainly
drawn from qualities commonly associated with certain
professions. Here are two samples:

"What Raju loved most was a nice, bulging purse. If
he saw one, he picked it up with the greatest deftness. He
took the cash in it, flung it far away, and went home with the
satisfaction of a job done well."16

('Trail of the Green Blazer')

"His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and
vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam
which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for
customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic
light and felt comforted."17

('An Astrologer's Day)

This analysis was extended to the minds of the people
he came in contact with; and naturally, those with whom he was
on the closest terms - children - provided the richest
opportunity for exercising his talent. This instinctive
insight into child psychology is fed mainly through two channels;
through memory, as his extraordinarily clear-cut recollections
of childhood pets, homes, and relatives in My Days reveal; and
through observation of his own daughter, and later, his grand

Other Stories, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, 1967, p.6.
17. Narayan, 'An Astrologer's Day', An Astrologer's Day and
Other Stories, p.1.
child. The reader is enchanted with the innocent freshness of the immortal Dodu:

"Dodu was twelve years old and he had a right to play cricket."\(^{18}\) ('Dodu')

and the childish perspective of the view of a mouse in a trap.

"He looks like Mickey Mouse!"\(^{19}\) ('Flavour of Coconut')

Narayan's *Gods, Demons and Others* (1964) is a retelling of ancient Hindu legends. An outcome of his interest in India's ancient culture, his other interests include archaeology and Carnatic music, the work is not a reinterpretation of myth and legend, nor is it a mere repetition or summary of the Puranas. Indeed the choice of material itself shows an originality in approach and insight: for example Narayan concentrates on some inconspicuous character like Narada, and the 'ungodly' Ravana.

Narayan's attitude is that folklore and legends are very much relevant today. His novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* is the retelling of the story of Bhasmasura in the modern context. Vasu, a bully of a taxidermist, who terrorizes everyone is Malgudi kills himself ironically enough by slapping a mosquito


\(^{19}\) Narayan, 'Flavour of Coconut', *Lawley Road and Other Stories*, p.20.
on his own forehead. As one character says - "Every demon carries within himself a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at the most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity," Walsh observes:

"The truth is that the Hindu myths and religious parables, like D.H. Lawrence's Congregational Hymns, are important not as theological scaffolding to the fiction but in being part of a whole economy of feeling itself sunk deep into the constitution of the novelist... The religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan's grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human feeling and experience."

VI

Humour being an intricate part of national character, that character must be felt in the inner determinations of humour. But this holds good only for its finer, subtler shades; the form, the essential trick of the humourist, is universal, and much the same everywhere.

Humour in Narayan can be shy, it can be tender; sometimes it is in the nature of a practical joke. In 'Attilla' and 'The Roman Image' for example he makes full use

of the Wodehousian digression and exaggeration:

"Our Attila exhibited a love of humanity which was disconcerting sometimes. The Scourge of Europe - could he ever have been like this? They put it down to his age. What child could help loving all creatures? In their zeal to establish this fact, they delved into ancient history to find out what 'The Scourge of Europe' was like when he was a child. It was rumoured that as a child he clung to his parents and his parents' friends so fast that often he had to be beaten and separated. But when he was fourteen he showed the first sign of his future: he knocked down and plunged his knife into a fellow who tried to touch his marbles. Ah, this was encouraging. Let our dog reach the parallel of 14 years and people would get to know his real nature."

('Attila')

Frequently, Narayan combines satire with humour: it can be either in a small detail, as when he has a dig at the municipality before reverting to the main story, as in 'An Astrologer's Day'

'The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchantment of the place was due to the

fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting."

('An Astrologer's Day')

Or in entire stories as for example in 'Lawley Road' when the town council celebrates Independence Day by changing the names of all the streets. Eight councillors want the name of Mahatma Gandhi for their streets, Nehru and Bose come a close second, followed by other famous names, and at last the town becomes a nightmare of confusion.

Touching moments are also poignantly presented, as when a postman purposely delays communicating the death of a relative to a particular family:

"But what has happened has happened, I said to myself, and kept it away, fearing that it might interfere with the wedding ..." 

('Missing Mail')

Even in his "supernatural" stories which evoke the eerie frightening atmosphere so superbly, we find Narayan's comic touch. When his car breaks down at midnight in a lonely spot, the protagonist tells himself, in a wonderful exercise at self-deception:

"I will count ten and if the car does not start by them I will abandon her and walk home." I looked at the ground

and counted "One, two, three..." I believe after I reached eight or nine I went back to one and counted up..."25

('An Accident')

The ironic reversal that we find at the endings of some stories show the author's deep understanding of the human mind.

In 'The Doctor's Word', a doctor, noted for his straightforward, almost ruthless, outspoken nature, tells a lie to his best friend that he, the friend, would survive, and the friend makes a miraculous recovery. The doctor's firm adherence to the truth hitherto, and the patient's implicit trust in him, brings the patient back from death. Similarly the story 'Engine Trouble' does not, as the title seem to suggest, refer to the "internal combustion" of a vehicle, but to the prize of a road engine, which becomes a while elephant for the poor prize-winner till an earthquake solves his problems'.

VII

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VII

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'The White Flower' exploits that obsession of the Indian mind, the horoscope. According to custom, if the

horoscopes of the boy and girl do not match, no marriage can take place. In the story, their fate is resolved by the hands of a child - the colour of the flower he picks would decide their fate. This horoscope motif is repeated in another story 'Seventh House' and later in The English Teacher.

'Seventh House' also has a parallel in The Vendor of Sweets where the protagonist's wife falls ill and is on the sickbed, surrounded by medicines, the family doctor and a hovering, anxious husband.

In 'Selvi' the protagonist is the self-appointed patron who is instrumental in bringing Selvi to the stage, organises all her shows, makes her famous and mints money till she suddenly spurns both him and riches after her mother's death and lives for her art alone. Selvi is what Rosie in The Guide might have become if her life had taken a slightly different turn. Years later, Narayan goes on to develop the protagonist's ironic reversal from con-man to philosopher - sage, transforming the irony of the short story into a meaningful vision of life in The Guide.

VIII

Commenting on Narayan's prose, Venugopal feels:

"A significant feature of Narayan's style is that, contrary to the practice among some of the other Indian writers in English,
in particular Raja Rao and Anand, he rarely attempts in his
dialogue to evolve an Indian English specially suited to evoke
the local atmosphere; yet his purpose is normally served by
the almost copybook English that he uses."26

The Indian situation calls for typically Indian proverbs,
willcisms and idioms. Here are a few examples:

"And it will all be over before you say 'Sri Rama'"27

("Fellow Feeling")

"He made a dash for the bathroom, turned the tap on
himself, and came out dripping. He took a handful of sacred
ash and smeared it on his forehead."28

("A Career")

A foreign reader, if he had no knowledge whatsoever of
Indian customs would be flummoxed reading the sentence quoted
above. Though one could explain his perplexity as more due to
the contextual than the syntactical aspects of the sentence,
sometimes Narayan becomes ambiguous because of, and not in spite
of, the simplest of sentence structures - use of the simple past.

"The station-master lived here with his wife and seven
children. He fed me. I changed."29

("The Tiger's Claw")

27. Narayan, "Fellow Feeling", An Astrologers Day and Other
Stories, p.43.
p.92.
29. Narayan, "The Tiger's Claw", An Astrologer's Day and Other
Stories, p.56.
'Change' refers to changing clothes, but it would appear that, because the station-master fed him, he changed his attitude.

Another story begins in the simple past tense, and meanders between present and past time, with no break in the paragraph, so much so that one gets the impression that 'he sat in a corner' and 'added up numbers' (referring to his occupation) in order to avoid all quarrels (referring to his present situation).

"He was told to avoid all quarrels that day. The stars were out to trouble him, and even the mildest of his remarks likely to offend and lead to a quarrel. The planets were set against him, and this terrified him beyond description. Many things that were prophesised for him lately were coming true. He sat in a corner of a big jeweller's shop and added up numbers all day. He left it at the end of a day."30

('All Avoidable Talk')

This partiality for narration without pause reaches its height in 'Half a Rupee Worth' where Narayan describes a rice-merchant's life, customs, family, business, habits, tax-evasions, profits - all in one long paragraph that ends only after four pages.

But such instances are few. Narayan has proved that the Indian experience can be effectively conveyed through the English language.

"English must adopt the complexion of our life and assimilate its idiom. I am not suggesting here a mongrelisation of the language... Bharat English will respect the rules of law and maintain the dignity of grammar, but still have a swadeshi stamp about it unmistakably, like the Madras handloom check shirt or the Thirupati doll."

The English language, indeed any language, can be made flexible enough to present an alien culture.

"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."

VIII

Narayan, therefore, stands alone in his engaging humour and fresh and humane insight. Malgudi is regional but not parochial, its citizens are buoyant and full of life on the

whole, and the author himself is tolerant but has no illusions of their perfection. "Narayan's fiction consistently creates a credible universe observed with an unerring but uniformly tolerant sense of human incongruity but gains in stature when at his best, he is able to hitch the waggon of his ironic action to the star of moral imagination." 33

Simplicity of content, sympathy of tone and sincerity of language are the hallmarks of this great writer. The cool clarity reflects an inner tranquility and an acceptance of life that makes his fiction different from that of Western authors - of even those who influenced him. According to Rosenthal,

"The books of Mr. Narayan are written in a style as bland and cool as a plate of curd, but are somewhat zestful and satisfying as a helping of mutton curry." 34

'Refreshing' is the word that best sums up Narayan's work. In a world that is increasingly fashion-conscious and 'fashions' run in literature too: where writers focus on one single dimension of 'anger' or 'psychology' or any of the numerous 'isms' to ineffectually portray a multi-dimensional reality, Narayan stands alone. As Walsh rightly says:

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"Narayan's mind sees existence very much in the way of the ordinary man... the fundamental oneness of existence in harmony with ... a quick feeling for the instantaneous present; an appreciation of the multiple and dispersed nature of existence."  