

CLASSICAL INDIAN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SHORTSTORIES OF R.K. NARAYAN

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A short story is a brief work of literature, usually written in narrative prose. Emerging from earlier oral storytelling traditions in the 17th century, the short has grown to encompass a body of work so diverse as to defy easy characterization. It is an art which is coeval with human existence. Stories form the basic framework which has been used even by religious teachers in all parts of the world and at all times to dramatize ethical and spiritual truths in a manner easy to grasp and remember, yet instinct with great complexity. Thus, the tradition of story-telling has a fairly continuous and uninterrupted history which is traced by many scholars to have originated in India. Many of the extremely popular stories which form an inseparable part of universal literature are said to have been the gift of India to the world. The short stories of R.K. Narayan are considered as a continuation of this rich and ancient classical tradition of story-telling that has been prevalent in this country since time immemorial.

Stories are seen to function as commentaries on various aspects of life, and are used for both moral instruction and aesthetic enjoyment. The Indian short story it has been held that:

They are entertaining, no doubt, but entertaining to a particular purpose. They are to teach the listener or reader how to conduct himself with a minimum of peril and a maximum of success. A very great number of Indian stories are indeed success stories, or to put it into Indian terms, they are designed to teach *niti*. The word translated simply as “conduct” but—a better rendering of the term—might be “how to succeed in life” (Dimock 203-04).

It also abounds in realistic dialogue and skillful characterization. The telling of stories is an art which is coeval with human existence. Stories form the basic framework which has been used even by religious teachers in all parts of the world and at all times to dramatize ethical and spiritual truths in a manner easy to grasp and remember, yet instinct with great complexity. Thus, the tradition of story-telling has a fairly continuous and uninterrupted history which is traced by many scholars to have originated in India. Many of the extremely popular stories which form an inseparable part of universal literature are said to have been the gift of India to the world. The short stories of R.K. Narayan may be considered as a continuation of this rich and

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Stories are seen to function as commentaries on various aspects of life, and are used for both moral instruction and aesthetic enjoyment. Their appeal is undeniable in either case because the stories are structured in such a way that they appear closest to the speech and experience of the common people. In addition to this, stories have been assigned the task of liberating both the narrator and his audience from the limited range of their individual consciousness finally leading to a more holistic vision, a more integrated way of life. Through the hearing and telling of stories people are said to escape from the restrictions imposed on them by their fragmented perception and material preoccupations.

Whether such exalted conceptions of narrative functions are validated today or not is debatable. Yet narratives are invariably seen as intertexts of the dynamics of a culture. In an in depth analysis of narrative fiction Steven Cohen and Linda M. Shires write:

A narrative recounts a story, a series of events in a temporal sequence. Narratives require close study because stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives. Our culture depends upon numerous types of narrative: novels, short stories, films, television shows, myths, anecdotes, songs, music, videos, comics, paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies and news accounts. All tell a story—the events making up a story are only available to us through a telling.(1)

From this it is apparent that narrative literature occupies an unassailable position in the study of a culture. Sometimes a narrative goes beyond literature in value because the story which is narrated even casually has a point to make, some wisdom to suggest. In the context of the Indian short story it has been held that:

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A narrative is defined as imaginary to distinguish it from biography which is taken to be one of the ramifications of *itihasa* or history. Excluding the novel of *katha* from the category of narrative fiction, the remaining classical modes can be seen to have contributed, to a greater or lesser extent, to the structuring of the modern Indian short stories including those of R.K. Narayan.

According to Warder, the first of these, the *parikatha* was described by Anandavardhan as “confined to the story *itvrtta* only, therefore presumably without any descriptive elaborations. It illustrates one end of life, or perhaps one topic *artha* only . . . it would seem to be primarily instructive” (193).

Next is the *sakalakatha* or the entire story which encompasses the action of the hero in more than one life. The short story tradition which can be traced as an unbroken line from the ancient times to the present may be limited to the category called *khandakatha* or *kathanka* which narrates a brief episode. It usually embodied expression of the action in simple, unpolished language though there are examples of more sophisticated organization. In the latter

case they may circumscribe the category of *nidarsana* or illustration which include satiric stories used for didactic purposes.

In spite of being products of the author's imagination, the traditional stories usually portrayed the episode with a high degree of realism. This is noted by Winternitz while speaking of narratives among the Jains:

. . . they allow us to catch a glimpse of the real life of the common people. Just as in the language of these narrative works there are frequent points of agreement with vernaculars of the people, their subject matter too, gives a picture of the real life of the most varied classes of the people not only the kings and priests . . . (545)

Moreover, mystery and humor formed components of some of the narratives. Unlike the complex organization of a novel, the short story exemplified a straightforward narration of events interspersed with some dialogue.

The tradition of an inset story within the main narrative, when the narrator began the story and after a time it was taken over by one of the characters who continued it, was a (fairly) rare phenomenon in short stories. However, when used, this technique was an effective way of recounting past events, and helpful in increasing comprehension of otherwise incomprehensible or mysterious events.

Some short stories favored a deviation from the happy ending usually associated with the novel. Often the view of life in short stories was bleak but the darkness was not total; there was a visible ray of hope. The hero often faced dire peril from which nothing could save him except his own presence of mind. He had to be on the alert whenever he left behind the sanctuary of his house, and this occupied a major portion of the time: the events in a story almost always took place out-of-doors. Privacy was not usually desired by any person unless it became necessary as a means of keeping the woman in the family away from the outside world of corruption.

In contrast to the traditional, classical picture of an Indian woman as a paragon of all virtue, her portrayal in short stories was more real and from a more humane angle. In Dimock's view,

The woman in the story literature appears as a spirited, quick-witted, lusty creature who often can think rings around her men.....If she is a wife, there is a constant suspicion that she might be unfaithful. Ample illustration is provided of this presumption of her lack of faith. (210)

Such illustrations serve to provide an insight into the accepted social norms of the age and help underline the historic significance of the perspectives evident in the narrative.

The terse, unadorned and straightforward style of narration was an added dimension of the short story which accounts for its continuing popularity. Instances of stories constructed on these lines are found in the most ancient ramifications of literature. They find adequate representation in the mythical or legendary narratives, in the *Vedas*, the *Jataka Tales*, *Panchatantra*, *Vetalpancavimsati*, of the Pali canon as well as in the modern short stories being written in the present age.

Within this broad classification of the short story, it is possible to trace some of the qualities associated with the narrative tradition in the short stories of R.K. Narayan chosen for study.

As a continuation of the age-old tradition of story-telling, the importance of the short stories of R.K. Narayan needs to be acknowledged. An analysis of some of these stories will

serve as sufficient proof of the conscious craftsmanship of the narrator which has resulted in some of the finest short stories written in recent times.

The story of Muni in “A Horse and Two Goats” forms an apt commentary on life in a remote and tiny village. It provides clear indications of closeness with the speech and experience of common village folk. The narrator relates, for example, this extract from the story:

Muni sat at the foot of the statue, watching his two goats graze in the arid soil among the cactus and lantana bushes. He looked at the sun; it was tilted westward no doubt, but it was not the time yet to go back home; if he went too early his wife would have no food for him. Also he must give her time to cool off her temper and feel sympathetic, and then she would scrounge and manage to get some food. He watched the mountain road for a time signal. When the green bus appeared around the bend he could leave, and his wife would feel pleased that he had let the goats feed long enough. (16)

The appearance of the bus as a time signal is typically rural in suggestion. The simplicity of its style and uncomplicated expression are added qualities which are as charming as they are suitable for the background of this story. But this is no guarantee for a life free of complexity. In fact, the picture of Muni’s declining fortune is bleak enough:

His fortune had declined gradually, unnoticed. From a flock of forty which he drove into a pen at night, his stock had now come down to two goats, which were not worth the rent of a half rupee a month the Big House charged for the use of the pen in their backyard. And so the two goats were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut and from which occasionally Muni could shake down drumsticks. (9)

The touching realism of the gloomy description does not preclude the possibility of change. What had declined can also change for the better. In fact, by the end of the story, the atmosphere changes completely from abject poverty to a picture of happiness and plenty:

Muni hurried homeward with the cash securely tucked away at his waist in his dhoti stole up softly to his wife . . . displayed his fortune . . . She snatched the notes from him, counted them . . . and cried, “One hundred rupees! How did you come by it? . . . ” “I have sold my goats to a red-faced man. He gave me all this money . . . !” (32-33)

Such a satisfactory conclusion is rather unexpected in the narrative tradition and may be contrasted with the usual patterns found in the turn of events in “Sweets for Angels.” In this story Kali’s most innocent efforts to distribute sweets to school children out of his own money is suspected as a dark deed with some ulterior motive. His reward for his affectionate gesture towards the children is severe beating from the crowd:

. . . a crowd was pounding and tearing at Kali, the more he resisted, the more violent they grew. They chased him from place to place . . . They pushed him down and sat on his chest . . . Blood trickled down and dropped on his tongue. He felt suffocated. (132)

All this suffering comes about because Kali lacked the essential qualities of self-preservation, namely, alertness or presence of mind and an outlook selfish enough to promote his

own interests to the exclusion of all else. So he learnt his lesson the hard way: “Hereafter I vow I’ll turn away and run for my life if I spot the tiniest tot ahead in the street . . .” (133)

Muni, in “A Horse and Two Goats”, does not make such a mistake. In spite of his old age, he is alert and wary as soon as he steps out of the protective walls of his house. This is adequately illustrated when he meets the American tourist. During this encounter he is always on his guard, even after he received distinct overtures of friendship from the stranger in the form of a cigarette:

Muni drew a deep puff . . . it was racking . . . but extremely pleasant . . . he . . . took stock of the situation, understanding that the other man was not an Inquisitor of any kind. Yet, in order to make sure, he remained wary. (19)

And when he is given a visiting card by the stranger, Muni shrinks away in distrust:

Perhaps he was trying to present a warrant and arrest him. Beware of khaki, one part of his mind warned . . . don’t get caught. Beware of khaki. He wished he weren’t seventy. . . . At seventy one didn’t run, but surrendered to whatever came. He could only ward off trouble by talk. So he went on . . . (10).

The instinct for survival against unknown odds is still strong in him, in spite of his age. In addition to this he has learnt from the experiences of a life-time that the only reliable help in times of trouble is his own presence of mind. It tells him that talking is his only weapon and he uses it effectively to extricate himself from what appears to him to be a potentially dangerous situation, finally turning it to his own advantage.

The story also abounds in realistic dialogue and skillful characterization. The former gives much scope for humor in the story, especially as Muni and the American speak at cross purposes, neither understanding the other’s language:

Muni continued his description of the end of the world, “Our pundit discoursed at the temple once how the oceans are going to close over the earth in a huge wave and swallow us Do you know when it is going to happen?” he asked. The foreigner now understood by the tone of the other that a question was being asked and said, “How am I transporting it? I can push the seat back and make room in the rear . . .” (25-26).

As the conversation progresses the lack of comprehension of the participants reaches a hilarious climax and the narrator comments:

At this stage the mutual mystification was complete, and there was no need even to carry on a guessing game at the meaning of words Noting the other’s interest in his speech, Muni felt encouraged to ask, “How many children have you?” Realizing that a question was being asked, the red man replied, “I said a hundred” (29).

Apart from introducing humor into the story, this conversation has another important function of sketching the character of the two men. Each expresses his own preoccupation which supplies a key to his character. In the case of Muni, it is a rambling recollection of his youth and what might have been. Sometimes he also digresses into an expression of attitudes cultivated through experience, like his theory about women, for example, “Women must be watched; otherwise they will sell themselves and the home” (24). On the other hand, the visitor’s pragmatic attitude and business-like stance stands out in all he says.

It is to be noted that almost the entire action of the story takes place in the open, near the statue of the horse. Not only in this story but also in many others a similar tradition is observable. In “Sweets for Angles” the narrator says that Kali’s home was a brick *pyol* attached to a locked-up deserted house in Royapuram (127), and the incidents that follow are enacted on the adjacent street. In “Cat Within” the shop-keeper sleeps outside his shop “so that no intruder should pass without first stumbling on him” (55). In spite of this precaution he is awakened by some noise in the shop and the rest of the story is concentrated outside the door of the shop, once more in the open.

The calling of an exorcist, in the same story, adds an interesting dimension. The exorcist’s questions probe the dark secrets of the shop-keeper’s past while apparently they are attempts to account for the evil presence inside the shop. Once more the narrative abounds in humor but this time it is skillfully blended with mystery that involves an element of the supernatural. The latter is maintained till the end of the story even though it is discovered that the miscreant is only a cat when the shop-keeper says so, he is asked, “How do you know what is inside the cat?” (67) This is typical of the attitude of the class of people represented in the story—making a trivial incident acquire a mysterious, inexplicable dimension.

In “Old Man of the Temple” the episode narrated is also inexplicable as far as logic and reason are concerned. The story of an old man, dead long ago, builds up an atmosphere of awe and mystery. The spirit of the old man haunts the area, according to those who live nearby, and takes refuge in the body of a driver called Doss. The authenticity of the protagonist’s weird experience is established by the locals who refuse to answer his knock, thinking that it is the old man’s spirit disturbing their rest as usual:

Someone moaned inside, “Ah, it is come!” Someone else whispered, “You just cover your ears and sleep. It will knock for a while and go away.” . . . I walked back to the car and sounded the horn. Then the door opened . . . “We thought it was the usual knocking . . .” “When was this knocking first heard?” I asked. “We can’t say,” said one. “The first time I heard it was when my grandfather was living; he used to say he had even seen it once or twice . . .” (86)

But the narrator sounds a cautious note at the beginning of the story by saying:

It was some years ago that this happened. I don’t know if you can make anything of it. If you do, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say; but personally I don’t understand it at all. It has always mystified me. Perhaps the driver was drunk; perhaps he wasn’t. (78)

The same story “Old Man of the Temple” can be used as an example of the type of narrative which avoids descriptive elaboration. The action is carried forward at a breathless pace which seems extremely suitable to the incident being narrated.

The story narrated here by the spirit of the old man, Krishna Battar, may serve the function of an inset to the main narrative by the Talkative Man; the inset story tells how the man became a spirit and has been cursed to haunt the area. But a better example of a story-within-a-story is found in “The Roman Image.” Here the narrator, in his capacity of assistant to a famous archaeologist, discovers a stone image in Sarayu. Great excitement follows this apparently momentous discovery. Hopes of fame, position and money reach the highest peak. Then he meets a stranger who says, “. . . if it is the image which you found in these parts I can tell you something about it” (109).

Thus begins the stranger's story about how the image is one of very recent origin and not a relic of the past. It is the work of a stone-image maker from a nearby village. The stranger discloses how the image came to be thrown into the river by the drunken priest of the temple. Before this the image was positioned as one of the two *dwarapalakas* in the temple. But the priest found their presence disconcerting and decided to put an end to their existence. For the crime of throwing the image into the river, "we dragged the priest before a law court and had his sent away" (112). Thus ended the villager's tale.

The effect of this inset story is extremely significant. The events of the past, effectively recounted, help the main narrative to reach its ironic climax, which puts an end to the narrator's rosy dreams of future grandeur as he confesses, "It took time for me to recover" (112). The stranger's story thus has the function of making the archaeologist's assistant aware of the futility of daydreaming and the moral comes across quite clearly.

Yet another function of story-telling, important both to the narrator and the listener, is disclosed in "Leela's Friend". In this story, Sidda, the servant, wins the child's love and trust by entertaining her with stories. Stories form an important part of the child's daily routine. They are also the incentive needed to induce discipline in Leela. In the absence of the ritual of story-telling, the child becomes intractable. When Sidda vanishes, after being accused of stealing Leela's gold chain, the child refuses to listen to reason. She wants her stories and the chain is a small price to pay for it. We are told:

After the meal Leela refused to go to bed. "I won't sleep unless Sidda comes and tells me stories . . ." (72).

The usually placid and well-behaved Leela suddenly becomes insistent in her demand. She says, "tell me a story" (73) and no amount of persuasion from her mother make her lie down. Leela pleads to be told a story. When all entreaties fail, the child passes judgment, "I don't like you mother . . ." (72). In Leela's eyes a person's worth is dependent on whether he/she has the capacity for telling a story. In this respect she compares her mother with Sidda and finds the former wanting: "Can't you tell the story of the elephant?" she asks her mother. When the mother expresses her inability to do so, Leela makes "a noise of deprecation . . ." (73).

As the narrative works itself to its climax we learn to trust the child's judgment more than that of her parents who have lost the intuitive faculty which the child possesses. The elders condemn Sidda without proof. Even when they have proof of Sidda's innocence they refuse to trust his integrity. The father's callous attitude, expressed in the words, "we couldn't have kept a criminal like him in the house" (77), is a comment against the society which condemns a man without trial. Once accused, the blot on his name does not allow him to lead a normal life. This and other examples of such stringent social criticism found in many of Narayan's short stories promote an understanding of the ills and encourage a corrective to them.

The creative aspect of story-telling and its effect of introducing the narrator to other levels of his own mind is also important. In narrating a story, a level of concentration and disciplines is required. This may be viewed as a step towards understanding and exploring the vast mine of hidden potential in the human mind.

Thus the assertion of the narrator, in "Leela's Friend" that tranquility of mind is a prerequisite for telling any story, gains efficacy. Leela's mother fails precisely because she has lost her peace of mind: "It was utterly impossible for her mother to think of a story now. Her mind was disturbed" (73). If a story cannot be narrated when the mind is disturbed it follows

that an attempt at telling a story successfully may be a method of curing the mind of disturbance. This may also have been one of the meanings inherent in the art from its past tradition.

Thus, it becomes apparent that the different threads of traditional narrative techniques are woven into the texture of these stories of R.K. Narayan. They not only make interesting reading but help transmit the essence of our cultural canon, mould the character and contribute to the human endeavor of giving original expression to the eternal truths. And in these aspects lies the indispensability of stories to the growth and development of humanity.

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