

THE DICHOTOMY OF INDIAN ASTROLOGY IN LIGHT OF R.K. NARAYAN'S 'AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY'

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan's 'An Astrologer's Day' encompasses itself different hues and colours of Indian cultural tradition. The story focuses on one of the crucial aspects of Indian religion and rituals which are blindly followed by the gullible without raising any doubts. It also tries to assert how the cunning and heartless astrologers have been befooling the innocent common lot with their half baked knowledge. The writer, here analyses the human psyche and ridicules the human follies. Though written in a very light vein, this story is a scathing satire on the human weaknesses and limitations. This article portrays the writer as a social reformer, who with his power of keen observation, brings out some of the bitter truths of Indian society.

Key words: astronomy, reform, bitter satire, swindle

R.K Narayan needs no special introduction as he has probably received highest attention among all the Indian writers in India as well as abroad. His life like description of an average Indian village, its typical problems and study of human nature creates a familiar world for him. He is highly respected Indian short-story writer and novelist who carved his way on Indian literary map on the strength of his ability to identify himself with his countrymen. R.K. Narayan being a straight forward descriptive artist possesses a sure, keen and penetrating eye for the important details in day to day affairs of the common man. He is a superb crafts man whose narrative delineations of episodes, events and situations linger in the memory of the readers for a long time and leaves an inerasable impression on the readers. According to Rosanne Archer:

Narayan is an artful delineator of, characters. His eye and ear are almost flawless. Just a line or two of dialogue and behold; there stands a man, complete, inside and out. (11)

Narayan, a realistic fictional writer has skillfully and dispassionately described the social facet of the typical South Indian life with the light and shade of joyful and ironic touches through the instrument of his characters. In almost all his stories there is a strong emphasis on plot and their extreme brevity. The variety of themes and subject matter puts him among the forefront fictional writers of the world short stories. The creative genius of Narayan creates a real life picture before the eyes of the readers. It has been rightly commented:

R.K. Narayan does not portray the photographic reality; he rather represents reality which is artistic...Narayan depicts a kind of realism which is something more than a reportage; he grabs the Indian mind fully with all its superstitious comprehension of life, its gullibility, its bewildering contradictions and its sarcastic comic irony. (Swain 8-9)

'*An Astrologer's Day*' is a titular story which has background of a small town. It is the first story of the collection with the same title. The title of the story is itself suggestive and makes the readers acquainted with the story that is to be followed. It is a very short story of hardly five pages but it has all the good qualities of a short story. It is typical of Narayan's work not only in its themes but also in its style and structure. The present story narrates a story of a day in the life of an astrologer who chooses to be one not by choice but due to the mysterious situation in the life which forced him to run away from his village and to be an astrologer. The day which the story narrates is the most important day in the life of the astrologer as it helps him to liberate himself from the past guilt and the circumstance which forced him to be an astrologer.

The narrative of the story begins with the pen picture of the astrologer who is the central character of the story. Narayan has minutely described the appearance, the clothes, and his paraphernalia of the astrologer- the con man. R.K. Narayan has also given minute details of the place where the astrologer used to sit with his materials he uses to ply his trade. It was a busy street with a number of shops. After giving the description of the surrounding of the work place, buzzing with activities of the different traders and vendors, Narayan describes the catchy phrases used by the groundnut vendor to transact business which gives a lively atmosphere to the story. The phrases used by him to lure the customers are:

He gave a fancy name each day, calling it 'Bombay Ice-Cream' one day, and on the next 'Delhi Almond' on the next, and 'Raja's Delicacy'. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 2)

Being the only astrologer at the place, it was not difficult to find clients for him, he was a saviour. Everything went well for sometimes. There was no challenge. He did not have any rival. He could earn his bread without any trouble. It is our common experience that in our ancient country miracle workers, sadhus, snake-charmers, astrologers, quacks etc. do not starve. Narayan's description of the astrologer really creates an impression of a holy man with special powers which enables him to provide satisfactory solution to the problems of the common man. He describes the narrator thus:

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. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced...To crown the effect he wound a saffron-coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 1-2)

The narrator who is not a qualified profession astrologer manages to cheat simple-hearted, trusting clients whose individual problems are usually related to money, marriage or health. Bogus practitioners of such arts take disadvantage of illiterate people who are in extreme need of permanent solution of their problems. How nice it would be if some gentleman claiming to possess divine power and full knowledge of stars offers help to turn their desert into garden just for a trivial amount? It has been rightly commented:

Through the astrologer Narayan gave a sharp and satiric commentary on the superstitions which flooded Indian life of his time though these fortune tellers are present everywhere but here in India they garner through their deceptive appearances a lot of respect. (*www.writersasylum.com*)

Narayan very well describes the crafty ways in which the astrologer surpasses his work and endeared to his gullible customers in the following words:

He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customer. But it didn't seem to matter at all. He said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 3)

The astrologer has mastered the tricks of trade in very short time. He can judge what type of response his clients expect from him. He prolongs his conversation with his client so as to get rough idea of his problem, to collect as many details from him as possible, to peep into his mind and then only will he begin asking questions. The questions are easy enough. The astrologer pretended to be omniscient. Majority of people in India are superstitious and behave irrationally. They are led to believe by holy figures and such impostors that any planet or stars located up in the sky can make or mar their fortune. They accept it as a gospel truth and never ask why some fortune tellers themselves fail to please angry stars. The very dealings of the astrologer with his customers are described thus:

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception...he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned: "Is there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you?" Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately; for, even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*,3)

It was a stereotyped life for the astrologer which he enjoyed to the fall. The speciality of Narayan lies in the telling the readers about the life of an astrologer whose name is not even mentioned by the writer, even no details of his past life has been given. It tends the readers to think that he must be an original inhabitant of this village. The narrative of the story takes a turn when the astrologer encounters a stranger whom he finds a potential client. He tries to entice him through his usual methods:

You look care worn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me. (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 4)

The stranger is not an ordinary client; it is difficult for the astrologer to accept his conditions. His usual methods of giving solution don't work with the stranger. The stranger wants something worthwhile from the astrologer. He has his own questions to ask and is ready to pay high fees for that but if the astrologer found bluffing, he would like to have his money back with interest. The astrologer found himself caught in the tight situation. He knows that this visitor would lend him in trouble. He may be exposed and his little empire may crumble. He

even felt uncomfortable for some obscure reason when he catches a glimpse of the face of the stranger when he lit matchlight to lit his cheroot. His self-confidence gives way and tries to wriggle out of the whole thing:

The astrologer felt very uncomfortable. "Here, take your anna back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today. . . ."...The other held his wrist and said: "You can't get out of it now. You dragged me in while I was passing." The astrologer shivered in his grip; and his voice shook and became faint. "Leave me today. I will speak to you tomorrow." The other thrust his palm in his face and said: "Challenge is challenge. Go on." (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 5)

The stranger is desperate to get right information from the astrologer. It was a question of life and death for him. But for the help of such experienced astrologer his mission would remain unfulfilled. After a brief talk, the astrologer suddenly realizes that the visitor belonged to the same place as he. They arrive at a deal and astrologer was to get handsome amount provided he satisfied the query of his client.

The client had none of the usual problems of ill-health, poverty, unhappy married life etc. He was in search of the person who had attempted to kill him by throwing into the well. Luckily his life was saved. He was burning to take revenge. The killer had run away from the village. But he would carry on his efforts to find out his enemy from any corner of the world. The astrologer was a bit nervous but he planned everything properly. A little carelessness on his part meant his life was to end quickly.

The astrologer gives very authentic information, sometimes even before being asked, to his client which astonishes the client as well as the readers. The astrologer tells the visitor that:

You were left for dead. Am I right?...

"A knife has passed through you once?" said the astrologer...

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead." (*The Joy of Reading Literature*, 5)

The effect is further heightened when the astrologer even gives out his correct name Guru Nayak. The visitor was impressed by his knowledge and accepted his defeat. When being asked by the stranger about the assailant, the astrologer informed him that the wicked person met a tragic end for he was crushed under a truck. He received due punishment for his evil deeds. He also advised the astonished client not to come again here in future. It would be in his interest to confine himself to his native village only. They depart never to see each other again.

This episode leaves the readers bewildered and musing whether the astrologer really possesses some uncanny powers after all. Narayan here creates a kind of mystery which commonly found in the stories of O Henry. It tends the readers to believe that some surprising and unexpected end is awaiting like the stories of Henry. Narayan is like Henry creates a kind of suspense in the mind of the readers but it doesn't confuse them as it commonly experienced while reading the stories of Henry. It has been rightly commented:

An Astrologer's Day" features a plot twist worthy of O. Henry, but the brevity and conciseness of the tale and its low-key ending save it from the air of contrivance to which O. Henry was prone. Also notable is the irony that can be appreciated only in reading—particularly the exchange in which the astrologer assures Guru Nayak that his enemy met the fate he desired. (*An Astrologer's Day Analysis-enotes.com*)

The readers come to know at the end of the story when the astrologer says to his wife that today great load is gone from him, that the killer was none else but the astrologer himself. Long back, he had run away after this event had taken place. He was under the impression that his victim must have died and so he left his ancestral residence for ever to avoid legal punishment. But strange are the ways of the world contrary to his expectation, he had to face the person whom he thought to be dead. He was smart enough to convince him to keep to his village only. It ensured his safety.

The story ends with a great relief for both of its only two characters. Though the victim could not take an eye for an eye, he was consoled that nature gave the assailant death he badly deserved. The astrologer is unburdened himself from his past sin of murdering a person in his silly youngster age under the intoxication of wine. He fabricated the story to keep any possible threat or danger to his life away. It has been attributed:

This story goes on to show how past can actually affect the present and future of one's life. The astrologer had committed a folly by getting into a quarrel when he was a drunk youngster, the result of which changed his entire path of life. (Archana)

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