

## **THE THEME OF HUMOUR AND IRONY IN**

### **R. K. NARAYAN'S SHORT STORIES**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*R. K. Narayan, widely acclaimed and travelled, and a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, is one of the illustrious Indo-Anglian novelists and short story writers. Being a born writer, Narayan in his works mainly depicts the South Indian life, with the striking features of irony, humour and satire. His irony is basically purposed to reveal human psychology and to bring out the contradictions inherent in human nature and experience. His humour appeals to the readers' intellect and he never tries to arouse laughter by boisterous or bawdy jokes or farcical physical activity. It is closely related to realism. Present paper focuses to point out the absurdities of life and the foibles of human beings through his delightful short stories, *An Astrologer's Day* and *A Horse and Two Goats*. He uses delightful humour & irony blended which is fresh, lively, potent and artistic in nature to exploit the ludicrous aspects of the South Indian society. They add a sense of beauty, charm and grace to the stories.*

**Keywords:** *Striking features-humour-irony-absurdities-ludicrous aspects-readers' intellect.*

#### **I. FULL PAPER**

Narayan is one of India's leading writers and one of the best known in the British commonwealth. His achievements as a writer contribute him a very prominent place among the Indo-Anglian writers. The story writer, like the Minstrel in European medieval tradition occupies a place of respect and popularity in Indian English Literature. He mainly depicts the South Indian life in his stories with the striking features of irony, satire and humour. His irony makes him a social philosopher and holds a mirror to society and compels to see its image in it.

Irony is a statement in which the implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from that which he apparently states. Narayan's stories are built round the principle of simple ironical circumstance, leading to the shock of discovery or surprise at the end. In *An Astrologer's Day*, a town astrologer meets a client and reads his past correctly, saying that a man had knifed him in a village brawl years before. He tells the man that the person who knifed him is dead and adds, "I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home" (*An Astrologer's Day*, p.6). The story ends with the shock of the discovery that the astrologer was himself the person who knifed that man and then the irony of both is reading of the past and his advice to his client is also brought home.

The story begins with the description of the street life of a busy small town where ground-nuts, magic stolen goods and promises of a bright future are sold to the middle class people who have little chance and fewer hopes

of improving the condition of their life. They, of course readily and knowingly accept the ground-nuts as Delhi almond and the mild and not too obvious flattery of the street astrologer as the prophecy of their future. The fake astrologers who ironically does not know what awaits him the next minute, knows how to convince people with the prophecies of a golden future, “..... and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers”(An Astrologer’s Day, p.6).

He knows the psychology of people who come to him and also the tactics to tackle them. Narayan humorously brings out how people easily believe what they want to. The searching like of the astrologer for customers is taken for a prophetic light. The bright vermillion of his forehead, his dark and thick whiskers and the scarlet head-cloth which can improve the look of even an idiot give his face an austere veneer. An element of mystery is added to the atmosphere by the dimly lit gas lamps and the flickering shadows.

It is the dim light and his stars, the astrologer has to thank for the way he recognizes his enemy Guru Nayak, whom he harmed years back. The tough looking ruffian has no patience with the usual petty talk of the astrologer about money, marriage and human ties. Guru Nayak challenges the astrologer to tell him about the man who made an attempt on his life and for whom he has been relentlessly searching for a number of years.

Ironically, the astrologer who has been cheating people all his life with calculated guesses, is for the first time in a position to answer Guru Nayak’s question with a certainty. And it is this opportunity he utilizes to save his skin. He again tells the man a blatant lie that the man who had harmed him was crushed under the wheels of a lorry and was killed years back. He establishes his credibility by calling Guru Nayak by name and also by giving a few personal details. He advises Guru Nayak to go back to his village and not to travel south again, if he wants to escape danger in future. The irony here arises out of the situation. Guru Nayak has been searching for the man sitting opposite him all his life and yet he does not recognize him. He would give anything in the world to lay his hands on the neck of the man who in fact is sitting holding his hand. The reader already gets clues to the identity of the astrologer, which at end of the story, get firmly established. The irony of the situation is employed here to amuse the readers. Narayan avoids moral judgment here; he neither condemns nor praises any one. It is paradoxical that unpredictable things happen to a man who predicts others’ future and is thus miraculously saved.

He advises Guru Nayak to go back at once for, “I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home”(p.6). As for the astrologer, the shock of discovery produces humour. He feels relieved too that his hands are free from the guilt of blood, a feeling that has been nagging him for several years.

We find Dr. Raman, in *Doctor’s Word* very straightforward and truthful in dealing with his patients. He treats his friend who is suffering from heart attack. Realizing that soft words often work as miracles on patients, he tells a lie to his friend by giving him the hope of survival. This, however, creates a great confidence in the mind of his friend and he eventually recovers. The doctor himself gets surprised and says, “He has turned the corner. How he has survived this attack will be puzzle to me all my life” (An Astrologers Day, p.23).

A series of ironic complications enhance the comic effect in the short story *Engine Trouble*. The story is narrated by the Talkative Man who wins a road engine in a lottery, but could not move it out of the Municipal ground. No buyer comes forward and he has to pay the rent for the place his engine occupies. No driver can be found and the transportation of the engine to some other place becomes an urgent problem.

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At last with the help of the temple elephant and fifty hired men and an old friend who knows a little bit of driving, he makes an attempt to move it out. But the situation worsens when the engine collides against the wall of a neighbour's house and demolishes it. It is a fine sight, the temple elephant yoked to the engine by means of stout ropes, with fifty determined men pushing it from behind, and his friend Joseph sitting in the driving seat. A huge crowd stands around and watches in great glee. The engine begins to move. It seems to be the greatest moment in his life. When it comes out of the Gymkhana and reaches the road it begins to behave in a strange manner. Instead of going straight down the road it shows a tendency to wobble and move zig-zag. The elephant drags it one way, Joseph turns the wheel for all he is worth without any idea of where he is going, and fifty men behind it cling to it in every possible manner and push it just where they like. As a result of all this confused dragging the engine runs straight into the opposite compound wall and reduces a good length of it to powder. At this the crowd let out a joyous yell. The elephant disliking the behaviour of the crowd, trumpets loudly, strains and snaps its ropes and kicks down a further length of the wall. The fifty men soar in panic and the crowd create a pandemonium. The talkative man gets slaps on his face by the owner of the compound wall. The police arrive on the scene and march the talkative man off (p. 39).

The narrator is imprisoned for causing public inconvenience. When he gets released from the prison, he faces a series of consequences like paying for the damages, paying for the hired men, paying for medicines for the injured knee of the elephant, and finally moves the engine out of its present station.

The narrator desperately tries every possible means. But a natural calamity averts further trouble and saves him. An earthquake drives the unwanted engine into an unused well in the compound of the same neighbour who now becomes very happy because his well has been plugged and he agrees to withdraw the case against the narrator. It is one of the most humorous stories in this collection.

*The martyr's Corner in An Astrologer's Day* is another story in which irony plays an important role in the control of the story. The title itself is ironic here because the real martyr in the story is Rama who has a good site for his establishment. He loses the site because a man gets killed when the police open fire on a mob to control a street brawl. Immediately some people with selfish interests paint the street brawl into a semi-revolution and the man who is killed becomes a martyr. As a result the shop-keeper loses the place where he used to run a lucrative business. The statue of the martyr is placed in the spot. The business of Rama dwindles and he is forced to take up a job in a hotel as a server. Words like *establishment*, *Prince of Caterer* and *hotel owner myself* produce a comic effect and also point to the pride of Rama in his work. The difference between the reality and what people with selfish interest make it out to be is made clear here. Here Narayan says, "of course the police came on to the spot presently, but this made matters worse, since it provided another side to the fight. The police had a three-fold task, of maintaining law and order and also maintaining themselves intact and protecting some party whom they believed to be injured".

The police in real have as much interest in maintaining themselves as in protecting one of the parties in the fight towards which they are favourable. Here, the writer ironically projects the shortfalls of public institutions. His irony is always gentle and genial and it never turns into a scathing criticism of the society. The incident in which the fight between two people is turned into a brawl and later projected as an organized movement is humorously described.

Narayan in a few of his short stories, links irony with the revelation of human psychology. In *Gandhi's Appeal* Padma is moved by Gandhi's appeal for funds and donates her gold bangles. On returning to her house she is afraid of revealing the loss to her husband who had warned her earlier. When at last she discloses her mistake, she learns that her husband too has committed a similar mistake for he was drifted towards the meeting unwillingly with fifty rupees in his pocket and dropped them into Gandhiji's charity box.

Narayan's humour is effectively brought out in quite a few stories. *The Antidote* in *Lawley Road*, humorously describes the agonies of a superstitious actor who is told that he would die on his forty-ninth birthday and is forced to enact a death scene on the very day. In this story Narayan brings out how trivial things acquire significance and have tremendous emotional impact on the individual depending upon his emotional make-up and the immediate mood and situation. Narayan's humour is highly sophisticated and is the result of his keen observation of life. He notices the human follies and carefully selects and orders his material so as to amuse and interest the readers. His humour appeals to the readers' intellect and he never tries to arouse laughter by boisterous or bawdy jokes or farcical physical activity. He does not exaggerate or caricature the situations he presents out of ordinary, common life that can be found by anyone with a sensitive mind and keen observation. His humour is closely related to realism. In this context, Dr. Paul Verghese says: "Narayan keeps very close to surface reality, for his aim is to reveal the tragic comedy implicit in ordinary life. His problems is to give the reader a picture that strikes him as typical or everyday reality. For this he depends on selection. He therefore excludes from his picture such aspects of reality as are not susceptible to comic treatment".

Gopal, the upcoming film hero is not a very intelligent man and his character is indicated by these phrases 'unnecessary for a puppet to do its own thinking 'like the proverbial carrot before a donkey'. He is forced by a dominating director to enact a death scene which he dreads. As the director is not in the habit of explaining the scene to the actors until the last minute, Gopal is not aware of the death scene until he comes to the set and it is impossible for him to escape. The director insists on Gopal's redoing the scenes until all life is gone out of him and then demands spontaneous action. The discomforts of tense scenes again and again, not moving from a place for hours together so as not to disturb the continuity of the scenes in spinning out dreams for the audience are delineated in the story. Until the last minute Gopal wishes that; the director's instructions would be that he should enact a swoon. The director finally commands him to enact a death scene. Gopal thinks: "This fellow looks like Yama. He will choke me if I don't die at his bidding"(Lawley Road, p.66).

Gopal's effort either to change the story or to postpone the shooting fails. The dreaded moment comes, he enacts the scene but Gopal is not at a stalemate. The real death and acting dead become the same to Gopal. By winking at the camera and moving a hand slightly when he is acting dead, he defeats the director Yama's purpose. That gives him the satisfaction of defeating the real Yama himself. It is a trivial incident that drives Gopal to his wits end again it is an insignificant act that relieves him of his anxiety. Narayan arouses our sympathetic laughter by describing how small things matter greatly according to the situation.

Narayan is a pure humorist whose aim is devoid of satirical intentions. We find Narayan's vision in *A Night of Cyclone*, an ability to see the comic side of life even in an agonizing situation. The story unfolds itself through the narration of the Talkative Man. The narrator gets a job in Vizagapatnam as a supervisor of construction. He comically describes how he is treated like an intruder by everyone around him until he asserts himself. As a part of that assertion he orders the workers to work on a rough day. But when he goes through the bazaar street he

finds the shops and the schools closed. A child asks him sobbing ‘is it true that the world is going to end today’? When he reaches home his wife gives him the same piece of news and takes pains to convince him that it is not true. The workers leave the work without the narrator’s permission.

By midday it becomes clear that they are going to face a rough storm. The storm acquires something of a supernatural and evil aspect to the couple living in an isolated house on the beach road by its fiendish glee and terrible gurgling and hissing noises. The sea water turns to the colour of dirty blood, the sea ‘starts raving and shrieking like a devil’ and the wing screams for blood.

The narrator tries to appear jovial to cheer his wife. He feels hungry and his innumerable efforts to light the stove fail. He burns a whole box matches and almost matches a camp fire with newspapers in the kitchen; the kitchen is full of smoke and his eyes and nostrils are choked but he fails light the stove. Here is a comic situation which arouses the hearty laughter of readers. Narayan’s power as a comic writer is evident from the way he juxtaposes contrasting and yet natural situations to serve his comic purpose. The fire in this world. When he reaches for some things to eat in the kitchen, a scorpion bites him. He starts moaning and howling along with his wife who is in labour pains. The storm becomes worse; the narrator’s wife needs help. He goes in search of help, finds that the nearest house is owned by a European police officer with a bull dog and hastily retreats. Meanwhile the storm grows violent, and it becomes more and more difficult, for him to move. With great difficulty he reaches the doctor’s house. The lady refuses to open the door but instead puts a number of questions to the visitor. The strong wind makes the communication through the window almost impossible, “It was most exhausting. I must have cut a very homely figure with the rain water dripping from me and my wild wet hair plastered on my face, and my dress swathed in mud. I could clearly see that the lady took me for an apparition or a thug. I asked her in the mildest tone possible the doctor was in. she summoned her last once of courage and replied that he was away Bombay and that he wouldn’t return for a month“(Lawley Road, p.131).

And she also informs him that there are a number of relatives sleeping in the house who would go wild if they are disturbed. The narrator’s sense of humor does not fail him even in the most agonizing situation. He understands that the doctor’s wife takes him for a robber. He goes home and assures his wife that help is coming. The storm gathers strength and becomes even more violent. When the house almost broken open and the kitchen crushed, the boy is born. Ironically the world does not end as the Talkative Man fears but a new life takes its birth. This is how comedy arises out of the situation. Narayan carefully selects the details to give the story its comic turn. It is the Talkative Man’s narration and his point of view which sustain the comic effect in the story. The discomfiture of the narrator engages and sustains our interest rather than cause our serious concern.

*A Horse and Two Goats*, another prevalent story of Narayan, provides rich humour born of a riotous confusion in a strange but credible situation. Here is subtle and real entertainment artfully told and carefully executed. An American gives a hundred rupees to Muni and carries away in his station wagon the statue of a horse, while Muni imagines that the payment is for his two starved goats all skin and bones – and he takes the money triumphantly to his wife who suspects that Muni must surely have stolen it. The dialogue between Muni, the Tamil-speaking goatherd with an English language vocabulary of “Yes, No” and the foreigner, not knowing a word of Tamil, is cleverly conceived and developed to produce highly amusing situation – comedy. “While brooding on this pleasant vision, the foreigner utilized the pause to say, “I assure you that this will have the best

home in U.S.A...Muni continued his description of the end of the world. "Our pundits discoursed at the temple 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?"... Muni was still hovering on the visions of avatars and said again, "I never missed our pundits' discourses at the temple in those days... "I am not a millionaire, but a modest business man. My trade is coffee". Amidst all this wilderness of obscure sound Muni caught the word 'coffee' and said, "If you want to drink 'Kapi', drive further up, in the next town they have Friday market, and there they open 'Kapi-otels'....." (A Horse and Two Goats, P. 20-21).

The entire story, based on the communication gap between two persons, has been narrated in a simple, lucid style that the story, right from the beginning to the end, glows with the radiance of delightful humour. Muni's fear at the sight of the American, whom he takes to be a policeman, his emphasis on his innocence and ignorance of a supposed murder somewhere nearby, his constant merriment to the origin and destruction of the earth by quoting mythical allusions provide simple, immaculate, delicate, sober and innocent humour. Narayan puts us in his debt again by the creation of several richly comic characters for whom we develop real affection.

The ending of the short story *Trail of the Green Blazer* is richly humorous. Here laughter is the result of an incongruous departure from the norm. Generally a pickpocket will not try to put the purse back into the pocket, but Raju in this story does this. Hearing his plea that he was trying to put back the purse, people roar with laughter. His plea becomes a stock joke in the police world, and they talk as: "For now he believed God had gifted the likes of him with only one-way deftness. Those fingers were not meant to put anything back" (Lawley Road, P. 19).

Accordingly, Narayan's delightful short stories deal his humour and irony as fresh, lively intoxicating and artistic in nature. They add a sense of beauty, charm and grace to the stories. The inclusive feeling is one of cheerfulness and rejuvenate sense of spirit. The reader is cheered to have a fresh look at life. Narayan is influenced by the ancient Indian method of narration and stories which have happy endings. In his humour he resembles James Thurber, Jerome K. Jerome, and P. G. Wodehouse.

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