



The Nuances Of Empathetic Realism And Benevolent Humaneness In Narayan's Stories

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Introduction - Life is a queer mixture of joys and sorrows alike. Rather than being a static entity, life is a dynamic organization that offers its own pleasures and pains as its rewards to the human beings. The discourses in the West, in their attempt to comprehend life offer as many '-isms' and '-tions' as nihilism, existentialism, pessimism, optimism and many others that may ultimately drive one crazy in the pursuit of the essence of life. The Eastern concept however offers a fresh perspective where it perceives life not as the cruel and vindictive entity forced upon a human rather it is viewed as one that ought to be cherished by valuing and respecting the humble humanity, devoid of all the affectations and pretensions. R. K. Narayan is one such author among the Indian Writers in English who has reverence for life in its true sense as it is realized by the humble folk of a small town of Malgudi.

R. K. Narayan, Padma Bhushan and a Sahitya Akademi awardee, is one of the three most prominent voices in the Indo-Anglican fiction (Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao being the other two). Having the credit of portraying the true and essential India to the world audience, Narayan is hailed as an author par excellence, who, with his simplistic narrative style and a keen insight into his characters, showcases the universality inherent in human behaviour. The paper focusses on three prominent short stories of Narayan, namely An Astrologer's Day, The Doctor's Word and The Missing Mail analysing these as the medium through which Narayan has portrayed the vivid contours of humanity, humble and submissive, yet strong and resilient in their own way, although typically commonplace and not grand or exclusive in any sense. Besides, it would also be a study of the realism inherent in the depiction of characters and circumstances with the stories being narrated through the perspective of a sympathetic yet detached observer.

The short stories of Narayan depict India in a microcosm of Malgudi, a town which is populated with commoners and such people whom one comes across in everyday life; the curious naughty school students, the common village folks, the fruit vendors, an astrologer, a gardener, a gatekeeper, a postman, a beggar, a snake charmer to name a few. These characters are easy to relate to in their manner and mode of behaviour, in their particularities and idiosyncrasies, their typicality yet their endearing individuality. Caught in the existential tussle, away from the weighty political happenings of the country at large, these characters are contented and possessed with the petty issues that in their circumstances seem to be glaringly crucial and vital for their survival.

Short and crisp that these stories are, they serve as armoury of the author to convey his vision of life and the role of human being in it. Life takes many unprecedented twists and turns that can never be anticipated; the

only choice one is left with is to accept as it comes to one. Such an artefact becomes the foundation of all the themes dealt by Narayan in his stories. The exceptionality of life that is consisted in its being unprecedented is the one that offers an opportunity to the author for inducing an ironic and twisted turn of plot which brings the character to the forefront and he is compelled to decide between the choices being offered by life only to emerge as victorious in the end. The characters in the three short stories discussed below offer an ample scope for the analysis of the strength as well as the vulnerability of a character that is trapped in the great existential dilemma.

An Astrologer's Day deals with the trick of a cunning astrologer, who is himself as ignorant of the stars and fate as any other commoner. Yet he earns his living by predicting the future of his customers. With stock phrases in his collection for all his customers, he used to beguile them. One evening when he is about to wrap up his small shop, a customer comes and demands him to predict when would he find his enemy and promises to give him a sum total of one rupee for the same. After much procrastination and bargaining, the astrologer starts telling him about his past and future. To the surprise of the customer, he also knows his name. He finally answers the last query of the man by telling him that the person he is looking for is already dead and further that there is doom that awaited him if he travels towards the place again. He commands him to return to his home and never to come back again. When he returns home after the ordeal, he shares his secret with his wife that he met a customer whom he thought of having been murdered by him long ago in the village. He feels happy as he feels unburdened of the guilt of committing a murder.

Weak and frail, this man who practices as an astrologer is one who, after a drunken brawl, runs away from his own village and people fearing that he has murdered a man, settles in another faraway place from his native village. The astrologer's fear of the man knows no bound when he sees him alive in front of him, still in the search of one who tried to kill him. Luckily, the time of sunset, the dark ambience of his prophesying spot and his appearance with vermilion and turban serve as a shield and saves him from being identified. He is forced to answer the questions of the angry customer and finally agrees to it. As is his practice, he pretends to foresee the life of his customer, but the cause this time was not only earning money but to save his own life. Saved ultimately by his talent of chicanery and verbiage, he at last feels relieved and satisfied of finally knowing that he had never committed the murder for which he considered himself guilty.

The Missing Mail is a tale of Thanappa, the postman who is a part and parcel of the lives of people in the area where he delivers the posts. A deliverer of the news about the concerning matters; the postman nonetheless also functions as one who shares the joys and sorrows of the receivers of the posts. Deft in his task of concern with the people he even suggests a proposal for Kamakshi, the daughter of Ramanujam, which is materialised but with the condition of marriage being solemnized as early as possible as there were no auspicious dates after the stipulated time and the potential bridegroom would then be moving out and so the marriage would in jeopardy for the next three years. The postman also offers his sincere services to the family in the best possible manner for making the necessary arrangements. So grave is his concern for the girl's marriage that he is unable to deliver the telegram of his uncle's death to Ramanujam as that would have spoiled the celebrations. The reason that is given by him portrays his immense dutifulness, not towards his profession, but to a cause that was he considered to be more significant:

“Yes, sir, and the telegram followed next day that is, on the day of the marriage. I was unhappy to see it. . . ‘But what has happened has happened,’ I said to myself, and kept it away, fearing that it might interfere with the wedding. . . . You can complain if you like, sir. They will dismiss me. It is a serious offence.”

So much overpowered is Thanappa by the desire of the girl getting married successfully that he even breaches the obligations of his duty and does not convey the telegram on time fearing that it may upset the whole plan of marriage. He commits it even when he knows that it is a grave fault on his part only to safeguard the future of Kamakshi, the girl whom he is familiar with since her childhood and whom he cherishes a lot. The desire to safeguard her future makes him forfeit his duty and the logic that he has for it displays his matured outlook as per which, something so grave as a relative's death cannot be allowed to interfere with the upcoming life of one who is standing on the threshold of a new beginning. Although wrong, the choice that he opts for at the

moment ultimately infuses happiness to Kamakshi's life which otherwise would have been in trouble adding to the family's sorrow.

The Doctor's Word on the other hand is the fable about one's faith in friendship and its miraculous powers. Dr. Raman, considered by the people of Malgudi as a powerful doctor who without any unpretentious acts could speak out the truth howsoever sour it may be, finds himself at a complete loss when he is to treat his dearest friend Gopal. After the operation, although he himself is sure that the possibility of his survival is relatively low, he is unable to convey it to his ailing friend who needs to know whether he should sign his will if his life is on its verge. Knowing that telling him would be an implication towards his upcoming death, Dr. Raman, contrary to his usual response to any similar situation, tells his friend that he need not sign as he shall recover for sure, although himself aware of the fact that this time he is pretending to predict the impossible. The next morning when he reaches Gopal's house, he is taken aback by the impossible occurrence that his friend has survived. The faith on the bonds of trust in friendship helped Gopal fight his death, but the phenomenon remained a mystery for curt and truthful Dr. Raman "I will bet on it. He will live to be ninety. He has turned the corner. How he has survived this attack will be a puzzle to me all my life" (23).

Dr. Raman, who never cared for the fact that on his words depended the life of the patient, is dismayed at seeing his dearest friend Gopal in a similar condition and inquiring for signs of life in the words of his friend, the doctor. A rational and a curt professional doctor, Raman never believed the fact that kind words on the part of a doctor can work miracles for the patients. Trying to catch even the thousandth probability of the chance that his friend may survive, the doctor is finally compelled to utter a word which this time he knew to be so untrue and trying to give solace to the patient,

Dr. Raman pretended to emphasise that he would definitely survive and so there is no need for the will to be signed. Contrary to his own disbelief, the words of Raman worked miracle for Gopal who had utmost trust on the truthfulness, the expertise and the word of his friend.

Speaking of the art of characterisation and the realism inherent in the stories of Narayan, one of his critics remarks that:

"He is free from any social or political preoccupation. He chooses matters generally from the day to day life of man and presents them through the medium of art and beauty in such a way that the readers are charmed right from the beginning to the end . . . like a catalyst, he is always neutral and allows his plot to move in its own way. He never distorts the action of the plot in order to suit his sentiments. He relies more on keen observation and steady accumulation of small details than on evocative description. . . . He has no great heroes and heroines – only local nobodies and local eccentrics, and his style habitually wears a deliberated drab air so that the thrusts of his insistent irony are felt all the more sharply."(Prasad vii)

Speaking of Narayan's narrative style, one of his most prominent critic remarks that is notable for its simplicity and unaffectionate quality where, unlike the authors stuffing their stories with all sort of pedantry and erudition, Narayan simply narrates the plot as showcasing reality without the touch of elegance or pedantry, not even didacticism.

His style is limpid, simple, calm and unaffected natural in its run and tone, and beautifully measured to its purpose. It has neither the American purr of the combustion engine nor the thick marmalade quality of British English, and it communicates with complete ease a different and Indian sensibility. (Walsh 7)

It is this quality of his writings that infuses the true essence of the Indian sensibility to his stories. Consequently the stories get transformed from the mere presentation in black and white to a representation where the characters as well as the situations come alive for the reader to relish each and every passing moment. Despite the fact that he uses a medium of communication which does not belong to our natural emotional and mental setup, yet he uses it so deftly that it seems to stand tall in its reputation among the gems of English classics. The comment of Raja Rao in this relation is indispensable:

"One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the

word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bi-lingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it “. (Rao 1) Owing to this Indianans in the works of Narayan, Graham Greene further writes about his friend, “Narayan wakes in me a spring of gratitude...without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian” (1).

Rather than deliberately manipulating with the plot, Narayan proceeds with it in a matter-of-fact and placid style that offers an opportunity for the traits of the characters to highlight their own selves. His characters thus need a little introduction regarding their physical attributes; rest of their persona gets displayed by the acts and conscious and deliberate decisions that these characters opt for amidst the situations that may lead to severe consequences ranging from heartbreaks to sorrow and loss of life being the worst of them. Emotions and feelings, rather than turning loose as the frailties of humanity, gain a fresh status of the human strength and faith. Herein lies the true empathy of the author who rather than pitying for human sorrows or disappointments, sympathises with that humane faculty in human beings that leads them to feel, think and act for their fellow beings, their friends or family or even their acquaintances. Such a portrayal can be undoubtedly deemed as a thoroughly realistic in its conception, progression and conclusion. Blending such realism inherent in situations with the ironical touches of his artistic expertise, Narayan successfully draws out an artistic marvel that seems to mingle aesthetic and didactic sense in balanced proportion so that the reader can get the intended message without the author deliberately pouring it over him.

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