

SOCIOLOGICAL PERCEPTIONS OF HUMOUR IN SELECTED NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN

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ABSTRACT

Humour is a state of mind having the quality of amusement to produce laughter. Wit and humour denotes species of the comic. Wit is the mental faculty of intelligence. R. K. Narayan uses his wit to produce humour in his novels. Sociological perceptions of humour in R. K. Narayan's novels can be appreciated as his concepts involve deep research giving different angles to literary perceptions. Humour is produced when he ridicules the conditions of man, his interaction and culture, through critical analysis to develop social order, acceptance and change. Humour is an art form and its acceptance depends on sociological factors varying from person to person. Humour contributes to physical and psychological well being of man. It is a cognitive experience which provokes laughter and provides amusement. Narayan's novels reflect the incongruities and absurdities of the modern Indian society in a fictional form. They are truly ironic in nature. Comedy is an art form which is used to reveal to the people the evil inherent in their society. R. K. Narayan uses comedy as a genre to wipe out corruption from the society. His characters are ordinary folks in the society to reveal to his readers the dichotomy inherent in the Indian culture. His works are deeply embedded in Indian philosophy. An attempt is made to discuss the sociological perceptions of humour seen in various situations, descriptions, narratives and dialogues resulting in the evolution and improvement of human life.

Key words: Humour, perception, sociological evolution, cognitive experience, irony.

R.K. Narayan as a humorist in Sociological perspective: "It was Monday morning Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday especially unpleasant in the calendar."(1944, p. 1)

The reluctance of a school boy to attend school brings out the humor in Narayan's writings. His imagination exposes the realities of life to create humor. Characters have a lot of humor with a view to providing an entertaining picture through a skillful use of language. Natures of all characters are a mixture of wit and humor to afford great pleasure to the readers. Narayan's humor is dignified, intelligent and mature because of deep thinking, profound scholarship and minute observations of temporary life.

In his first novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) Narayan says that "... And yet you are wondering about the house like an unleashed donkey" (p. 58). Swami's exams were about to start from next day. He makes a list of things to buy for the examination and gives it to his father. His father gets very angry and scolds him for wandering like a donkey in the house and not being serious about studies.

The word "donkey" used by Narayan as a metaphor makes the reader laugh as we all know the qualities of a donkey. Swami is being compared to a donkey that has no work and just lazing around. Narayan's humor provides an important ingredient in his otherwise strong indictment and criticism of the contemporary society and its many facets, oddities in characters. His mild satire provokes people, to think and change towards the betterment of life. His stories like 'Swami and friends' have humorous details which provoke emotion and enlighten experience.

Swami's father reads an article of a courageous lad who comes face to face with a tiger. He tells Swami to learn something from the article which leads to an argument between them. Father challenges Swami to sleep alone in his office room to show his courage. (1935, p 181)

Swami felt lonely when he was sleeping in his father's office room. His imagination of ghosts and devils grew, and his heart beat faster. He had a nightmare of being chased by a tiger. The psychological effect of an imagination of tiger and trauma faced by Swami tickles the funny bone of the reader (p 185-186). Narayan has the innate quality of going in-depth of the childhood experience and puts in with a touch of humor.

Swami crawls under the bench as he could see a shadow in the room. He bites into the flesh of the thief and thus becomes a hero over night; he is praised by the police and teachers. "You saw how beastly our headmaster was. If you had been in my place, you would have kicked him in his face." Rajan comes to meet Swami when he was joined in Board High School. Earlier he was in Albert Mission school. The Headmaster whacks Swami for breaking the window pane of the ventilator in his office room. All the people who wore caps made of foreign cloth removed it and threw into the fire. Swami follows them in their hartal and breaks the window panes of the school with stones. Next day Swami was called by the Headmaster and punished. He rushes out of school muttering that he doesn't care for this dirty school. Swami recollects this incident and says if Rajam were in his place he would have kicked him in his face.

The situation reflects the strong nationalism among the people of Malgudi, and they are united to protest against the British Rule in India by boycotting wearing caps made up of foreign cloth. Swami wants to gain sympathy from his friend Rajam. Amusement arises from false claims upon our sympathy which ends in laughter. Swami calls his Headmaster a beast for his strict behavior. Swami's character is full of the innocence

of a child. It is natural for any human being to revolt on being punished, but Swami being a student had to suppress his anger.

In the novel "Mr. Sampath" (1949) Narayan explains about the life of the printer. "It (The Banner) is only concerned with the war that is always going on between man's inside and outside.... It struck him as an odd mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. (p. 6) Srinivas writes articles for the weekly edition called The Banner'. There is always a struggle going on in the mind of a person about life. Mind and heart clash and make a person more confused and indecisive.

"..... It was due to bargains like yours that no industry ever found it possible to raise its head in our country". (Narayan, 1949, p 5, 65) The house owner belonged to an older generation, and because of poverty, he had to bargain while buying things. Srinivas reacts to this and says that it is because of bargaining no cloth industry has come up.

"The traffic was held up for half an hour when Babu's procession passed. Babu sat with the top of his head shaved, with diamonds sparkling on his ear lobes and rose garland around his neck in a taxi." Babu's first day to school is described by Narayan humorously. Parents feel very proud to send their ward to school. Similarly, Margayya took Babu in a procession to school, thinking that one day he would become a great person.

"You will be called a useless donkey by the whole world," Margayya said." (Narayan, 1949, p 112) Margayya gets very upset when his son could not pass the tenth exam; he calls him a useless donkey as all his dreams are shattered. The technique of using animal imagery makes us laugh.

"It began to look like a shot down a crowd with broken wings." (Narayan describes his attachment towards an umbrella). (p 66,145) Margayya was an umbrella devotee and was very possessive about it. He would not lend it to anybody. His old umbrella was damaged. The author compares it to shot down crowd with broken wings. The technique of comparison of an umbrella with dead crow is very amusing. R.K. Narayan, as a humorist in Sociological Perspective further says in the novel 'The Vendor of Sweets' (1967) about Jagan a sweet vendor. Mali was insisting on having a phone at home, but Jagan says that Malgudi being a small town everyone is within shouting distance and there is no need to waste money on a telephone.

Mali had some work with the Railway Officers, and he was asked to wait for some time. He gets angry and shouts at them. He says that in India lot of time is wasted. People never do their work on time and thus keep postponing things. There is no value of time in our country. (Narayan, 1967, p 76) Assumptions are sometimes dangerous. It may ruin the life.

Description of funny scenes at a market to evoke laughter, cows being chased by a rogue bull, pedestrians are running for life. Difficult situation for pedestrians, fear for losing life makes reader split into laughter. (Narayan, 1967, p 72, 152-157) In olden days, the inexpensive postcard was used to write letters with maximum information in smallest handwriting in space available. When Jagan recollects his days before marriage; he accompanied his elder brother to see the bride. His brother being very authoritative and commanding wanted Jagan to do as he wanted by manipulating his eyelids. The behavior of a person is technically used by an author to instigate humor.

In the novel *The Painter of Signs* (1977) Narayan tells us about a painter. Raman was a voracious reader of books. He goes into a philosophy of reading habits of men. Different characters of bookworms put a smile on the reader. "It's not like these days when people are afraid of children. The house was full in those days" said Aunt. (p 17-19)

Raman's aunt hints at the olden days where the house was full with many children, and they would obey elders. Now- a- days a child frighten the parents and blackmail them. The reversal in the role of parents and children chuckles the reader. Message on population control tickles the funny bone of the reader. Raman feels that bonus should be given to the bachelor's for they are contributing towards population control by not marrying. (Narayan, 1977, p30)

Population growth is put ironically by Narayan, and the imagination of the author produces chuckle in the reader. Where endless chains of humans are seen struggling for food, clothes, and shelter. (Narayan, 1986, p 56, 117) In the novel 'A Tiger for Malgudi,' Narayan produces humor by including animal characters in his works. The tiger is the speaker in this novel. "It happened in the Head Masters room. I believed and noticed a very dignified man jumping on his table and heaving up into an attic".

The tiger enters the Head Master's room to take some rest. There the tiger could see a man jumping on the table to reach attic, where he feels safe. Narayan describes Head Master as a dignified man in an authoritative position doing a silly thing like jumping on the table and hiding in the attic to save his life. In the novel 'The Talkative Man' (1986) Narayan amuses the reader by providing a humorous character of a talkative man. Dr. Rann's wife was in search of Dr. Rann. She reaches Malgudi and meets a talkative man and explains everything to him. The talkative man wonders whether his title would be taken away by Mrs. Rann. (p 55)

In this novel 'The World of Nagaraj' (1990) Narayan says that misunderstanding between Gopu and his son Tim. The technique of using absurdity in the character of Nagaraj, when he is talking to himself loudly produces amusement. (P37-62)

In the novel 'The Grandmothers Tale' (1992) Narayan explains about his Grandmother's life. Bala and Viswa were married in their childhood. Whenever Viswa would go to see his wife, his neighbor would tease him. Viswa's longing to see his wife puts a smile on the reader. (p 16)

The novel Next Sunday (1956) is a collection of humorous essays written by R.K. Narayan. He is a master of wit and satire at his hilarious best. Article 'Radio License': Narayan was passing through the last grace period allowed for renewing his radio license. He had to fill a form to renew his radio license. While writing his name in capital letters, he misspells it. The author says that it always happens when one has to write slowly in block letters. Thus he spoilt the form and was very scared to ask for another form of the officer.

He takes the new form and starts filling in the details carefully. He has to give details like mother tongue, some people in a family, a street name in the address, etc. He felt that they want all unnecessary personal details. At one end of the form, he comes across a note as 'Strike out the words not wanted.' The author was greatly relieved to see the note and started striking the columns which were not necessary. At the end to his amazement, he saw that only his name and address were left in the form. Narayan tries to poke fun at human nature. When we want to be extra careful, we make a lot of mistakes. (Narayan, 1956)

In the novel 'The Reluctant Guru' (1974) Narayan has written some funny essays. In 'The Reluctant Guru' the basic instinct of fear is always there in human beings. In this essay, Narayan's fear as emotion is the cause for a laugh. A reporter interviewed Narayan and tried to elicit his views on life after death which happened to the theme of his novel 'The English Teacher.' He asked whether Narayan believed in death if it is possible to talk with spirits or seen a ghost or experienced mysticism. Narayan simply answered that he wrote fiction. Book 'A Writer's Nightmare' is a collection of humorous essays. In the essay 'Pick Pockets' Narayan picks up rare topics for his pieces and tries to evolve fun from it. He admires pickpockets because they are gentle, non-violent and harmless.

In the novel 'Gods, Demons and others' (1987) Narayan has retold about mythological stories. Sukracharya tells Yayati that a rightful man performing misdeeds is like a thief. He has to suffer for his duplicity. (p 43, 144) The episode of Draupadi getting married to Pandavas is unique in the great epic of Mahabharata. It is usual in the western world, getting married to many people but not at the same time. Draupadi in her previous birth has asked for a boon for a husband with five qualities of strength, justice, intelligence, courage and beauty. The whole thing arose from a misunderstanding. All these qualities were found in five Pandavas. Thus she had to marry Pandavas according to the boon conferred on her.

In the novel 'Waiting for the Mahatma' (1967) Narayan explains about Gandhism. Explicit political references are comparatively rare, and only one novel of Narayan 'Waiting for the Mahatma' introduces politics. Graham Greene refers to Malgudi as never tangled by politics. Several of his novels of the middle period can be seen to be dramatizing the impact of late colonial, Gandhian, and post – independent policies. Narrative discourse is in which the secular and spiritual co-exist in which the political and social are viewed as an illusion of existence.

Narayan's fiction appears to deal with a conflict between social action and a quietist renunciation that finds analogies in classic Hindu narrative. Naipaul recounts his re-reading Narayan after a period of years, came to the realization that his novels were less than purely social comedies and had once taken them to be religious books.

Thus the role played by humor in sociological perceptions has been dealt in this paper. The main objective of this paper is through these perceptions there can be evolution in the thinking of humans in a larger perspective as well as improvement in their life.

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