

R.K.Narayan's Malgudi Milieu in his Short Stories

C. Gopal Reddy
Research Scholar [external]
Department of English
Annamalai University

Dr.R.Vijaya
Assistant Professor of English
Annamalai University
Annamalai Nagar
Tamil Naidu.

Abstract

R.K. Narayan's greatest achievement was making India accessible to the outside world through his literature. He is regarded as one of the three leading English language Indian fictional writers, along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. He gave his readers something to look forward to with Malgudi and its residents and is considered to be one of the best novelists India has ever produced. He brought small – town India to his audience in a manner that was both believable and experiential. This paper seeks to explore, Malgudi was not just a fictional town in India, but one teeming with characters, each with their own idiosyncrasies and attitudes, making the situation as familiar to the reader as if it were their own back ground.

Key words: Malgudi Milieu, Talkative Man, Fictional town, archaeologist, hunters.

Narayan made his Malgudi familiar and dear to his readers. His Malgudians are common men and women. Whatever the theme he selects he maintains suspense till the end and he made his readers to wait eagerly what will happen in the next Narayan himself tells about the selection of theme of a story:

“The material available to a story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically, but in outlook habits and day-to-day philosophy. It is stimulating to live in a society that is not standardized or mechanized, and is free from monotony. Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and there by a story)”. [Malgudi Days P VII & VIII]

A generalization which can be made about Narayan's short stories and novels in general is that they refer to the social and moral methods of the typical Indian Society. These stories may be cited as a great instance of the Malgudi comedy which underlines traditional Indian belief in the fundamental integration. Narayan's world of comedy strengthens the suggestion that the social sense is the dominant characteristic of the Narayan story. This social sense impression proves itself in the narrative in the terms of an upholding of a social awareness implanted in traditional morality which accepts scope for a subtle play upon human failings. The universe of this setting is Malgudi which, as H.M. Williams has rightly observed, is "relatively free from the terrible privations and agonies, political conflicts and economic depression of Anand's India." [Indo – Anglian Literature P.49]. Again, as H.M. Williams says, Malgudi life gives Narayan the background against which he can set his comedy of deviation. It is against this setting that the Talkative Man Stories are placed and they are based on themes and situations which are familiar, improbable and far – fetched. An exception to this thematic pattern is "A Career" in which there is a tendency towards drawing a moral conclusion. Narayan's stories in general imply a moral, rather than explicitly state one.

"The Roman Image" is an interesting short story in which the Talkative Man communicates to the reader in first person narration his experience years ago when he was an assistant to an archaeologist. One of the attributes of this short story is that in the significant Narayan way there is a humorous dig at archaeological activity in general. The archaeologist is not named. He is not given an identity other than that of an amusing archaeologist. The profession is called that of "gravediggers". The archaeologist found Malgudi "eminently diggable. It is as though he is launched on the exercise of discovering a buried city under the mound of earth of the Malgudi district with an enthusiasm for pushing the earliest known civilization three centuries antiquity. He is therefore a rival of the discoverers of Mohenzadaro. In this story, The Talkative Man has greater identity than the "Doctor". The Roman Image referred to is a piece of temple architecture with an arm, an eye, the nose and the mouth missing in it. The Talkative Man stumbles upon it in the river Sarayu. The archaeologist finds it as a piece belonging to the Roman empire under the reign of Tiberius II. This discovery leads him to go on an advertising spree. Narayan here scoffs at the self – promotional and pompously parading instincts of pseudo – scholars of the present day. Indeed, the image has not even the remotest connection with

Roman history. This story is revealed, in a narrative within a narrative, ironically indeed, by a rustic who could relate bare facts as he knew them at first hand. The rustic reveals to the Talkative Man the story of a temple priest who was a confirmed alcoholic. The fact of the priest being an alcoholic falls in line with the pattern of the spinning of yarn set in motion already in the narrative by The Talkative Man. The view of the rare conjured up by the priest's behavior is strengthened by the Talkative Man who starts with the possibility of an exciting discovery but moves on to the fantastic suggestion that the image is not Roman but native to the soil of Malgudi. A touch of exaggeration, an eccentricity are given to The Talkative Man's account of the archaeological expedition in order that it conforms to the overall pattern of exaggeration in the narrative offered by the rustic about the possible dumping of the image in the river by the priest himself. The rustic's story, with its characteristic thoroughness, proves the fantastic claims made by the Talkative Man and the archaeologist so that the only course of action left open for the doctor and the Talkative Man was to burn their research finding and then to consign "The Roman Image" to its original place in the watery grave. The Talkative Man recognizes that he has been made a fool of by the rustic's story and by his own views of a great importance. This recognition on the part of the narrator achievements for him sympathy in the reader's Judgment. Thus in the creative process, the comic possibilities gain the upper hand over the satirical possibility of having a dig at antiquarians. This is the impact of the wonderful story of the Talkative Man.

I had never seen him in such a rage before. I wrapped the image in a piece of brown paper, carried it to the seashore, and flung it for into the sea. I hope it is still rolling about at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal. I only hope it won't get into some large fish and come back to the study table! Later a brief message appeared in all the important papers: "The manuscript on which Doctor – and assistant were engaged has been destroyed, and the work will be suspended." [Under The Banyan Tree & Other Stories 38]

"The Tiger's Claw" is another short story narrated by the Talkative Man. It reveals The Talkative Man's gift for dramatizing his narration. The story given by him is yet another example of one revealing sheer inventiveness and a capacity for playing upon the susceptibilities of the listener. As in "The Roman Image", even here at the end of the story there is a sudden reduction of the heroic proportions of the

Talkative Man's record of his encounter which the tiger's dead body still bears as proof of the Talkative Man's brave fight with it:

The man who cut it off must have driven his knife with the power of a hammer. To a question, the hunters replied, "can't say how It happens. We've met a few instance like this. It's said that some forest tribes, if they catch a tiger cub, cut off its claws For some talisman and let it go. They do not usually kill cubs." [Malgudi Days 44]

The story starts with an omniscient narrator describing a village procession in which the killers of a tiger are garlanded and paraded in the streets along with their prize trophy, the tiger, which held a reign of terror for nearly five years. As the procession watched by a passionate crowd drifts along, the Talkative Man comes behind and ensure the village folk witnessing this spectacle that it was with this tiger that he once had a lone encounter, without guns and other equipments. He casts himself now in the role of an agent of a fertilizer company. In one of his Journeys across the lizer, he comes to a remote, almost unvisited village whose only centre of civilization was its improvised railway station. The railway station was not a building but an abandoned railway carriage which is the scene of the encounter with the tiger. Narayan gives ample suggestion of the unsafe surroundings of the place. The Talkative Man says that he was warned not sleep on the platform: "No, no, there are very bad parts. Not like your town. Full of tigers....." The station-master said. The talkative man therefore is lodged for the night in the station-master's office, that is, the discarded railway carriage.

The Talkative Man gives a detailed description of how the tiger entered the railway carriage. Indeed, the tiger came when he was dreaming of "catlike in size but full-grown tigers". The dream shatters into reality and for a muddled moment the Talkative Man was not sure whether he was awake whether the dream was continuing. When he realizes that it was a real tiger he was face to face with the Talkative Man indulges not only in self-pity but also in an illustration of his fighting spirit. From dream to reality there is a sudden transition. The tradition here is of a narrative within a narrative, as in "The Roman Image" which evolves a

spectacle of heroism revealing ultimately the fact that the so called heroism or unearthing of history is in fact no more than an ingenious conception or fabrication. The Talkative Man builds up an element of high drama, and even humour, in his description of the moves and the counter moves he and the tiger both make in the encounter. What is strikingly clear is that the pretended fight is obviously absurd. The subtle use of the language of exaggeration lends the description an air of probability. The Talkative Man's account is so absorbing that it carries with it the resonance of truth so that it can be argued that the listeners show an indication to believe in his account. That he is perhaps fooling them is noticed only towards the close when the hunters explain a possible reason for the missing toes of the tiger. The hunter's explanation does have a capacity to carry conviction with the people at large because their version is based upon the folk superstition that tribesmen use the claws of a tiger cub as a talisman. The conclusion to this story inspires the whole Malgudi background recreated in story after story clearly by Narayan such that inspires the whole Malgudi background recreated in story after story clearly by Narayan such that communal living, faith in folk story, folk customs, popular superstitions are shown as the fibres out of which the Malgudi fictional carpet is woven. It is here that the Narayan story can be seen to have a kinship with the Jatakatales, as C.V.Venugopal suggests. But as R.A.Jayantha rightly points out, Narayan's narrator is more a universal type belonging to the long established tradition of oral narration. [The Talkative Man Stories of R.K.Narayan: A study" 65]

Narayan writes of people and places about whom he knows and amongst whom he lives. He peoples his fictional world with men and women whom we come across in the South Indian middle and lower class society. They are all involved in such professions as teaching, sweet making money-lending, printing, film making begging, pick-pocketing etc. In this manner he gives us an unequivocal picture of the ordinary world and explores its comic portrayal. He writes of his own art:

I get all influences from life, from the surrounding, a little bus-stop or a street shop.

But I think, we see life in greater concentration in a smaller area than in crowd....see more concentrate life and you can see the type and forces of human relationships, activities, aspirations, in greater details, and that is very important for a writer. That is in short, the influence I seek. I seek life wherever ago. I

seek people, their interest, their aspirations and predicaments. [“Views of an Indian Novelist, A Interview with R.K.Narayan”.P.13]

References

1. Jayantha, R.A. The Talkative Man Stories of R.K.Narayan: A study,” The Literary, Endeavour Vol. I, No.2, October 1979.
2. Narayan, R.K. Malgudi Days, Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 1996.
3.”Roman Image,” Under The Banyan Tree & Other Stories. Chennai: Indian Thought Publications, 1985.
4.“ The Tiger’s Claw”, Malgudi Days, Chennai: Indian Thoughts publications, 1996.
5. Suresh Kohli, “Views of an Indian Novelist, A Interview with R.K.Narayan”, Indian and Foreign Review, May 15, 1975, P.13.
6. Williams, H.M. Indo-Anglian Literature: 1800-1970. Madras: Orient Longman, 1976.

