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Characters and Characterisation in the works of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan is the doyen of Indo - English writer and is one of the most admired writers in English. He is an excellent writer and a true master of literature. He writes with grace, humour about the lives of middle class people.

Narayan's character-sketches have brilliant variety and characteristic individuality that make them fascinating. He sees characters in their inter relations with the social milieu of their times. On account of vibrant quality of Indian life, he chooses almost all characters from the rustic background and sketches them with a vividness of colour within the scope of the short story. Narayan's characters is wide. He writes, "Everyday I like to meet a new person". Eventually, the colour and variety of India makes public itself in the most convincing manner through his sharply drawn characters. All his people are hale and hearty, whether they are clerks or coolies. Thus, his fictional world abounds in men and women with zest for life.

Narayan's fictional world focuses immediate concern with the oddities and eccentricities of men. His characters, as a matter of fact, are individuals, rather than types. In order to impart individuality to characters, Narayan employs various devices. His complete objectivity as a creative writer made it vitally important for him to infuse life into the inhabitants of his fictional world. His characters are illiterates barring Doctor Raman. As Frank O'Connor says: "The short story has never had a hero. What it has instead, is a submerged population group". Thus, he is a writer of 'resolved limitation', making Malgudi as the headquarters of his ambience for his writings. By creating immortal characters, Narayan as a writer has become immortale.

1. Introduction

One of the most prominent salient features of the modern short story is 'character analysis'. The novel deals with the evolution of a character, whereas the short story usually focuses on the essential traits of the character. This characteristic feature is considered primordial from the point of view of its significance in the overall pattern of the story. The writer generally deals with only one aspect, situation or mood since he or she has a restricted field in terms of space and time. The modern story author views life from within. Hence the characterisation is sharper and more intense, so that the psychological basis of the action is completely grasped. Thus a short story writer projects his view of life through the delineation of character, action, details of natural description, comments of the characters and the images that he or she employs.

Short story is the most popular genre in English literature. The reasons for its name and fame is its simple technique. Characterisation is a significant aspect of this technique. E.M.Forster (1927:36) refers to two types of characters 'flat and round'. Flat characters were termed as 'humorous' in the 17th century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In its best form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality. In this context E. M. Forster (1927:47-48) states : "One great advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized whenever they come in – recognised by the reader's emotional eye not by the visual eye which merely notes the recurrence of a proper name". We have to admit that flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones and also that they are best when they are comic. The case of 'round' characters is just opposite to the 'flat'. It is not constructed round a single idea or quality. It shows many qualities and changes by circumstances. The round characters have big achievements in themselves. The most enjoyable fictional characters fictional characters seem very 'life-like'.

There are various types of traits used for the revelation of a character by the writer, such as general, physical, personal and emotional. Techniques like conflict, action, self-discovery, contrasting characters, narration and confession and motivated actions help to make the character 'round' and three-dimensional.

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In the presentation of character, the writer uses direct or dramatic method. Direct method works best for the 'flat' characters and dramatic method suits more to the 'round' characters. The story writer presents his characters at different levels per his or her requirement. Thus, portraying a character is a complex process involving a lot of work on the part of the author. Narayan has created a marvellous portrait-gallery. His characters are realistic and lively. He has created several immortal characters like Mr. Sampath, Jagan, Margayya etc. In the case of short stories, there are Sankar, Subbiah, Swami, Velan, Sastri etc. These people are ordinary men and have high ambition for money, success, love and lively. All the protagonists are individual but at the same time they have universal significance.

Narayan's character-sketches have brilliant variety and characteristic individuality that make them fascinating. He sees the characters in their inter-relations with the social milieu of their times. Thanks to vibrant quality of Indian life, Narayan chooses almost all characters from the rustic background and sketches them with a vividness of colour within the scope of the short story. He brings the characters into light by pointing out their individual identity of love and anger, joy and sorrow and their elemental feelings. They are not showy in expressing their feelings, but the reader observes them in a new perspective and the character gets transformed by the subtle stroke of suggestions by the story writer. Narayan's characters are not lined up on opposing sides of the field like football teams, the peasants versus the landlords, workers versus capitalists, noble satyagris versus the "Red Men (the British)" as in Rajarao and earlier still in Anand".¹ His characters, with their oddities and eccentricities, do not strike as figures from Morality plays or comedies of manners or humours. In fact, they preserve a basic quality of individuality in spite of their allegorical and representative character in some cases.

Narayan's characters cover the whole gamut of the lower and middle class society. The range of his characters is wide. Narayan writes, "Every day I like to meet a new person". Consequently, the colour and variety of India makes public itself in the most convincing manner through his sharply drawn characters. We find the children of the school going age, the middle-aged men and women and the gardeners besides servants. All his people are hale and hearty, whether they are clerks or coolies. His fictional world is peopled with men and women with zest for life. "Although the Narayan hero does not become a Sthitaprajna- one who on account of his 'settled' spiritual condition becomes inured to the shocks and surprises of life--- he does manifest a pietistic feeling for life's continuity induced by the dynamics of his experience that is human and holy".²

Narayan's world abounds in representatives from all walks of life. The readers encounter with characters drawn from begging to teaching; the pick-pocket Raju (Trail of the Green Blazer), the wayside vendor Ram (Martyr's Corner), the labourer Kali (Sweets for Angels), the gambler Kannan (Wife's Holiday), the black marketeer Subbiah (Half-a-rupee Worth), the unemployed youth Ranga (Four Rupees), the film actor Gopal (The Antidote), the film actress Bamini Bai (Dasi, the Bridegroom), the artist Krishna (The Artist's Turn), the school teacher Sekhar (Like the Sun), the postman Thanappa (Missing Mail), the gardener Annamalai (Annamalai), the physician Dr. Raman (The Doctor's Word) etc. Thus we face the kaleidoscopic view of life. Narayan's characterisation is transparent and convincing. Stories like

"Iswaran", "Four Rupees", "A Hero", "A Career", "Trail of the Green Blazer" etc. are remarkable for their eternal character sketches. These stories of character are the most absorbing and where other considerations obtrude, character remains the dominant interest. For instance, in "The Martyr's Corner", the focus is on the chapati-seller rather than on the violent action. Narayan consistently draws the reader's attention to the vendor's drab, monotonous life, his comments on his customers, his attitude towards existence, his sense of occupying a niche in the social order, and the sense of dignity and satisfaction that transforms complete dreariness into human significance.

It is important that we can classify the basic modes of Narayan's characters. In the first place, there are so many male characters belonging to the group of idealists or self-willed. Characters like Dr. Raman (The Doctor's Word), Soma (Such Perfection), Sekhar (Like the Sun), Vijaya (The Comedian), Nambi (Under the Banyan Tree), Gopal (The Antidote), Krishna (The Artist's Turn) etc, belong to this category. For example, Sekhar, the school teacher, values truth so much that he would not tell a lie even though he has to pay dearly for it. When asked by the headmaster to give his opinion on the former's musical performance, Sekhar tells him that he should not continue his music lesson as it is an exercise in futility. The next day the headmaster calls him and asks him to examine a hundred test papers in one day. Sekhar reflects that, "sitting up all the night with a hundred test papers was a small price to pay for the luxury of practising truth". (Lawley Road, P.159).

Krishna, the poor artist would not accept anything from the greedy publisher who knows little about art. Gopal, the film actor, would do nothing disagreeable on his birth day as he is asked to enact the death-scene the very day the astrologers have predicted his accidental expiry. While agreeing to play the ominous role, he would at least wink his eye to assure himself that he is not dead. In "All Avoidable Talk", Sastry has to face a great ordeal when he tries to avoid all avoidable talks under the instructions of an astrologer, who has warned him against an impending calamity. Unable to speak anything, otherwise, it may bring some harm to him, he endures silently all types of humiliations from his customers and the master.

Vijaya, the comedian, would not accept the compliments and a gold medal when he knows that he has failed miserably in making people laugh. Soma, the sculptor, would not maim the image of god, though perfection brings disorder to the village. Dr. Raman, a well-known practicing doctor "never believed that agreeable words ever saved lives". Interestingly, at the moment of trial, he comes when his friend Gopal waits for death-sentence from his lips. The idealist, for the first time in his life wavers, "If my words can save his life, he shall not die". In the same way, Nambi, the great village story-teller, who once made people hold their breath in suspense, finds his powers failing and tells his eager audience his 'last words' and then leads a retired life. "The rest of his life (he lived for a few years more) was one great memorable silence" (An Astrologer's Day, P.229).

Along with the above characters discussed, we have also Sastry (The Gold Belt), the astrologer (An Astrologer's Day), Thanappa (Missing Mail), the priest (The White Flower), Krishna (The Artist's Turn), Subbaiah (Half-a-rupee Worth), the watchman (The Watchman), etc. In the story "The Watchman", the watchman puts his strenuous efforts in order to prevent the girl from committing suicide.

He explains to her the misery that all people face sooner or later. In this context, he says, "If people tried to kill themselves for each one of them, I don't know how often they would have to drown". (An Astrologer's Day, P.64).

Narayan pours life to the character of Subbiah in "Half-a-rupee Worth". Subbaiah is a rice merchant-cum-hoarder, who earns a lot of money during the period of the World War-Two, when the prices of things touch the sky. He hoards rice in a secret warehouse and sells it high with his greed during stock scarce in the market. "He never sold rice except in small quantities, and to known customers. He always took their cash in advance, and told them to come late ... Sometimes he turned the money with: 'sorry, not available' ..." (Lawley Road, P.47). Thus Narayan's characterisation of Subbiah is very graphic and he remains one of his memorable creations among the readers from recreation point of view.

In the story "Iswaran", the man of straw, Iswaran is a college going student who is unsuccessful in passing Intermediate Examination is, in fact, a unhappy soul. He decides to end his life, but just out of anxiety walks down to the Senate Hall and finds his roll number with the second division. He is so thrilled at the news that he falls into a hilarious day-dream. The lunacy of the moment seizes him and, imagining himself "the sole occupant of the world and its overload", he rides his 'horse' into Sarayu and is drowned. In "Seventh House", Krishna, a young and faithful husband whose wife is lying seriously ill, is assured by an astrologer that if he is unfaithful to her, then he could avert the influence of Mars in the Seventh House of his horoscope. Krishna's deep affection for his wife makes him try in vain to transfer his love to a prostitute. His timid attempt to visit Rang, a temple dancer, is frustrated by a well-meaning carriage driver and he finally sorrowfully resigns himself to his fate.

Narayan's fictional universe abounds in a traditional Indian society where men hold a superior position than women. In his works, Narayan's immediate concern is with the oddities and eccentricities of men. Social taboos are imposed on women community and traditions are clamped on them. His women are not remarkable as characters. He is fascinated to know more about street corner or a crowded bus-stop than in kitchen or drawing room. When we go through many of his writings, we usually do not encounter face to face with a woman. When she appears at all, it is naturally as a maid-servant, or as a mother or as a wife-tolerant and kind-hearted. However, there are only a few stories like "Mother and Son", "A Shadow", "The Shelter" and "Selvi" or even "Willing Slave" in which women emerge as having some identity.

Narayan's female characters are passive and unimpressive except a few like Selvi (Selvi) and the wife in "The Shelter". He scarcely cares to mention women by their names. They are referred to casually as the mistress of the house or as Shanta's mother or simply as mother. However, they play their roles in completing the domestic chores. Narayan is fully aware of the bad state of women in orthodox male-dominated society, and in her very mean condition, he finds roots of Women's Liberation. He envisions through the character of Selvi and the woman in "The Shelter", the emergence of a new woman who in very subtle manner tries hard to assert her identity. Narayan expresses his own view regarding the position of woman in his autobiography, "My Days."

I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of woman as Oppresses to man, her constant-oppressor. This must have

Been an early testament of the Women's Lib Movement, Man Assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such Subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notions of her independence, her individuality, stature and strength.

A wife in an orthodox milieu of Indian society was an ideal Victim of such circumstances.

In R.K'S stories we notice three categories of women: the submissive women who surrender to their husbands; the quarrelsome, complaining who want luxurious life and try to dominate their husbands but can't snap their marital ties; and self-assertive independent type who can select their own ways. While the first two categories are conventional type, the third one is pertaining to the new emerging ethos of Women's Liberation force.

Women like Kanan's wife (Wife's Holiday), the ayah (A Willing Slave), Rama's wife (The Martyr's Corner), Sambu's mother (A Shadow) etc. belong to the first category of the conventional women who are modest and docile besides religious and loving. Their major concern is the well-being of their husbands, and children. They are sketched as mothers, wives and maid servants and maintain the household works. They are easily influenced by the feelings of delight, grief and anger. They believe in ancient Hindu laws and stick to them unquestionably. In "A Shadow" the writer lends a moving picture of the mind of a woman who goes to witness the film woven round the life of her dead husband. She could not bear the sight of the scenes in which her dead husband appears. They remind her of her rich and prosperous life which is now beyond her reach. "In their years of married life, how often she quarrelled with him for it: even on the last day he had sat thus after dinner, in his canvas chair, with the newspaper before him..." (Lawley Road, P.82). The memory of her husband torments her very much that she faints in the theatre.

In "Dodu", the title story, Narayan in a soft way lambasts the attitude of the elderly people towards the children. By bringing in the Pests-Man climbing up a coconut tree and plucking out the sap found as its top, Narayan creates a typical South Indian atmosphere. Things which were collected by Dodu and Ranga remind us of Tom Sawyer, an immortal character of Mark Twain, and his choicest treasure. If Dodu's 'treasure' consists of yellow pockets of cigarette foils, pieces of coloured thread, attractive book jackets etc., Ranga goes to school with everything except books, to wit, frogs tied to a string, flies in a match box etc. "Ranga" presents Narayan at his best. This is one of the comparatively early tales which show that the author had matured so early in his career. It is simple and moving tale of a motherless child who develops into a frustrated and disillusioned youth, good for nothing. Even the minor characters --- a peon, a vagabond, a coolie, a teacher, a loving father and a kind merchant---have been successfully delineated.

"Annamalai" and "A Breach of Lucifer" deal with two simple, uneducated, sincere, hard working, faithful servants. Annamalai is a household servant. Sam is a christian male nurse and attendant. Both leave the scene rather, too, abruptly. There is 'something fierce as well as soft' about them. They serve their masters with scrupulous care throughout. But both are governed by their own impulses and leave their masters in the end in an unceremonious way. Their company and conversation inspired their masters to narrate these stories. Each and every story is characterised

by 'character study', a glimpse of mankind and 'an infusion of India'. In his article entitled "The Fiction Writers in India" Narayan writes, "Every writer...hopes to express through his novels and short stories the way of life of the group of people with those psychology and background he is most familiar, and he hopes that this picture will not only appeal to his own circle, but also to a larger audience outside".³ "Seventh House" seems to be the continuation of "The English Teacher". His marriage was an unconventional love marriage. In order to avert the influence of Mars in the Seventh House of his horoscope and thereby to save the life of his ailing wife, he tries in vain, as advised by his astrologer, to transfer his love even to a prostitute and a temple dancer.

Narayan off and on pictures woman as assertive and suspicious and dominating over husbands. In the story "A Horse and Two Goats" it is contextual to note the character of Muni's wife, who serves as a foil to other female characters of Narayan. When Muni grumbles at the food stuff – leaves and drumsticks – served to him daily, his wife comments:

You have only four teeth in your jaw, but your craving is for big things. All right, get the stuff for the sauce, and I will prepare it for you. After all, next year you may not be alive to ask for anything. (A Horse and Two Goats, P.67).

We, as readers get perplexed if any Indian woman will use such a harsh language when she has got a talk with her husband. Muni's wife is rather matured, experienced and though equally loyal to her husband, she is however, more assertive in her approach towards her husband. Similarly in "Four Rupees", Narayan elaborates us the wife of a lower class home, who is often complaining and suspicious. When Ranga returns home late after a menial job, his wife snares:

"It is seven O' clock? When am I to buy the things and cook the food? You think I am born to slave? It will be a fine lesson if you are made to do Without a meal tonight." (Lawley Road, P.46).

In the same manner, in "An Astrologer's Day" Narayan describes a typical middle class woman who demands an explanation from her husband for the delay and feels excited at the good earning of her husband:

It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said, "Count them, one man gave all that." "Twelve and a half annas", she said over-joyed. "I can buy some jaggery and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her." (An Astrologer's Day, P.6). "Selvi" is the only story which narrates the incident of a woman gradually freeing herself from the clutches of a male dominated society. At the outset, Selvi is lured by Mohan into the glamorous world of music, dance and fashion. She has been utilised for money and her programme, her activities and manners are controlled by Mohan. Due to this process, she loses all her liberty and remained herself as a puppet in his hands. She got separated from her mother, who trained her in music and is thus, symbolically alienated from her source. Her mother's demise shocks her into an awareness of her degradation and need to face with stiffness. Hence, she cannot bear the sight of any one belongs to the mechanical, glamorous world, "please leave me out of all this, leave me alone, I want to be alone hereafter. I can't bear the sight of any one" (Old & New, P.74). She realised like

Nora, that the life she was leading was the life designed by some other person. She shakes off the artificial symbolised by Mohan. Selvi opened a window shutter, just a crack and said firmly, "Go away, it's not proper to come here at this hour..." (Old & New, P.76). Thus she tries to learn in order to have a life of her own, her own choice.

In "The Shelter" the wife has enough stamina of feeling which she exhibits on the day of the final turmoil which is the culmination of their marital dishormony. The writer puts forth a realistic account of the problem of maladjustment between the wife and the husband. "...every other hour they expressed differing views on everything under the sun: every question precipitated a crisis, none too trivial to be ignored..." (Lawley Road, P.71). The problem of maladjustment has reached to such an extent that though they meet just for a moment, the same old argument crops up between them and the wife dashes into the rain and vanishes 'beyond the curtain of falling rain drops' with her last words, "Nothing can hold me thus," The wife's last act reminds us of Ibsen's well-known character Nora in "A Doll's House". When the husband cajoles her into coming back, there follows a conversation which reminds us that the story is an indication of Ibsenism and the feminist idea:

"You think you can pick me up when you like and throw Me out when you feel that way. Only toys are treated thus." (Lawley Road, P.73).

She offends her husband on his very face and thus also points out the whole orthodox generation. She brings out her voice of the essential being in her suppressed self. The story has got its contemporary relevance as it reflects the shifting value of relationship between man and woman. In this way, "The Shelter" marks Narayan's growing realisation of the need for the woman's standing up for her dignity and identity. This also indicates Narayan's attempt to project his fiction in a changing perspective to suit the requirements for the current Age.

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