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R. K. Narayan's (Post-)Colonial Perspective: Malgudi in Its Humour

Abstract: R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) is considered one of the founding fathers of Indian writing in English, along with Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and G.V. Desani, and is best known for creating the imaginary town of Malgudi. Another important feature of his fiction is what both critics and readers call a gentle or light-hearted humour. Humour has often been used to both subvert and survive various forms of political oppression (see Ștefănescu, Tripathi and Chettri). In Narayan, Malgudi, the centre of the action, is both a colonial and a post-colonial town, created and recreated over years and even decades. Since Malgudi can be considered a metonymy of India (see Mukherjee), Narayan's use of humour as a subversive device, together with his skilful examination of the cultural and colonial context, can be perceived as a poignant criticism of the British colonial system and what it entailed, specifically the suppression of what constitutes 'Indianness', the Indian way of life and cultural values. On the other hand, the light-hearted and subversive irony allows Narayan to offer a more profound insight into the human nature as such, while juxtaposing a colonial and post-colonial context.

Keywords: *bathos; humour; irony; Malgudi; post-colonial reading; R.K. Narayan.*



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Indian writing in English started to be firmly established in the 1930s with the key figures of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and, according to Salman Rushdie, also G.V. Desani. In a writing career that spanned over sixty years R. K. Narayan, whose full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (1906-2001), authored fifteen novels, six collections of short stories, non-fiction works, renderings of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and other works. A number of his fictional works were adapted into films, plays and a national TV series. Three of his first four novels, *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The English Teacher* (1945) reflect certain aspects of the writer's life. As for writing in English, for Indians, in Raja Rao's words, the "telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (vii). The latter is more than evident in R. K. Narayan's writing.

The first thing that comes to mind in relation to this task is what Narayan is best known for – the creation of an imaginary South Indian town that he called Malgudi. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, Malgudi represents "the quintessential Indianness" (*The Anxiety of Indianness* 170) and she even argues that, as such, the town has "a metonymic relation with India as a whole" (170-4). It represents the 'Indianness,' "by which is meant a good-humoured inertia and a casual tolerance which almost any reader in the country is expected to recognize as familiar" (Mukherjee 170, 171).

Furthermore, if an Indian were to name two terms associated with Narayan's fiction, the second, after the town of Malgudi, would be humour. The four principal substances, "liquids" or "fluids," *humours*, that the ancient Greeks believed flowed through the body and constituted the defining characteristics of a personality, reflect the no less ancient Indian theory of Ayurveda (Vedic period, second century BC), where the three *dashas* – variously translated as *humours*: *kapha*, *pitta* and *vata* play an analogous role. (Kakar and Kakar 113)

Humour as we understand it is firmly rooted in the Indian Hindu tradition. As Koenraad Elst observes, "numerous puns and other forms of language humour [...] formed an intrinsic part of the teaching of Sanskrit grammar and literature" and in mythology "mild humour as well as satire are often employed" (*Humour in Hinduism* 35). Vedic hymns, though cherished, "were uninhibited in highlighting the human side of the gods they worship," while making fun of the gods along with "jocular variations on the god's characters" (36), whose marriages, loves, physical contacts and all that goes with them are described with a "bawdy explicitness", are a commonplace in the Hindu mythology (Elst 35, 36).

In the interpretations of myths, worship and ridicule generally go together. (Elst 37) For example, the elephant-headed god Ganesha is already depicted as comical in his iconography – his round belly is the result of his sweet tooth. His riding vehicle is a rat. A highly important figure, though, he is venerated as the remover of obstacles. Sarcastic representations can be found in fables, in which animals and their behaviour and actions represent human weaknesses, for example in the *Jataka Tales* or the *Panchatantra*. And satirical treatment is even reserved for priests and ascetics in the Hindu theatre. (Elst 41) Finally, while looking at the Buddhist position, which emphasises renunciation and escape

from this life that is full of suffering, Elst contrasts it with the “original Hindu outlook, shared by the mass of Hindus, uneducated in philosophy, [which] is actually quite enthusiastic about life” (*Humour in Hinduism* 50).

Apparently, it can be argued, Narayan builds on this tradition. His humour is more often than not related to the common man, the everyman, and as such juxtaposes absurdities, incongruities or scepticism of everyday life with the hesitations and questionings of the self, which is on the way to or undergoing the process of personality growth, the (re-)construction of the inner person, the character of the person, even identity. While the impact of such a process on the protagonists is considerable, they are still presented as somehow detached from a seriously uncritical evaluation of the self. Nevertheless, as Narayan’s view is overall “quite enthusiastic about life” (Elst 50), it is always imbued with sympathy and empathy.

The following quote from *Mr Sampath* may serve as a representative example of Narayan’s technique:

In 1938, when the papers were full of anticipation of a world war, [Srinivas] wrote: “*The Banner* [magazine] has nothing special to note about any war, past or future. It is only concerned with the war that is always going on – between man’s inside and outside. Till the forces are equalized the struggle will always go on.” [...] There was a touch of comicality in that bombast. It struck him as an odd mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. (*Sampath* 6; 7)

The juxtaposition of the serious on the one hand and of what can be considered irrelevant, negligible or absurd, on the other, produces the comic and even the ironic in this context.

Mr Sampath provides another pertinent example of the above. In it, a representation of the spirit of ‘Indianness’ and India – omnipresent in Narayan’s fiction – goes hand in hand with traditional Indian wisdom related to mythology and cosmological-philosophical concepts (represented, for example, by the imagery of *maya* or the duality of co-operating opposites, which will be pointed to below). Here it is characterised by a reference to the Upanishads, the sacred late Vedic and post-Vedic Sanskrit scriptures, which are juxtaposed with the protagonist Srinivas’ seemingly endless ruminations and reasoning, creating a gentle comic effect:

He had tried to summarize, in terms of modern living, some of the messages he had imbibed from the Upanishads on the conduct of life, a restatement of subjective value in relation to a social outlook. [...] a voice went on asking: ‘Life and the world and all this is passing – why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?’ [...] Awaiting the right sentence for his philosophy, he had spent several hours already; he must complete the article by the evening if he was to avoid serious dislocation in the press. (Narayan, *Sampath* 30; 31)

The personal development of the protagonist of *The Guide* serves as a distinctive illustration of a mixture of the tragic and the ironic. Raju, who began his life as a dishonest tourist guide and whose fraudulent and corrupt ways landed him in prison, ends up being unwillingly and accidentally worshipped as a *sadhu*, a spiritual guide by the inhabitants of a nearby village, who begin to provide him with food and seek his advice. Not wanting to disappoint them, he confesses his past and decides to fast, following the villagers' belief that this will bring the rain and save them from famine. The irony here is not just that, after a life of a selfish deceit, Raju is for the first time willing to do something selflessly for the others, which for him means risking his own life. The irony finally becomes a caricature of tragedy when the fast of a *saint* calling for rain becomes a show with crowds of people gathered on the spot, press reporters and filming, while Raju finally collapses in the mud (Narayan, *The Guide*).

There is another aspect: a number of scholars have noted and analysed the undeniable role of humour as a means of subversion and survival. For example, Bogdan Ștefănescu, in discussing resistance to communist dictatorship, in a cultural context familiar to some of us, mentions political jokes and satire as a means – if not immediately successful – of subversion, then of survival (*The Joke Is on You* 20-24). What may seem paradoxical, and here Ștefănescu quotes the Romanian author and civic activist Ionel Alexe, is that “[t]his language was not only tolerated, it was discretely encouraged by communist authorities” (Alexe 2013 qtd. by Ștefănescu 22). In relation to Narayan's writing as within the Indian cultural context that interests us in this paper, Tripathi and Chettri argue that “[Narayan] maintains the equilibrium between tacit criticism of the colonial system and the projection of Indianness, and thereby successfully builds a counter narrative against the British hegemony [while] humour is used ‘both as a rhetoric device and as an outlook’” (152; see also Ridanpaa 712 qtd. in Tripathi and Chettri 152).

While it is true that Narayan's work is replete with criticism of the colonial rule and his anti-colonial stance is clearly expressed e.g. in his essays “English in India” (*A Storyteller's World*) and “When India Was a Colony” (*A Writer's Nightmare*), it is not Narayan's habit to make overt anti-colonial statements in his fiction, not even in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), the novel that deals directly with the Independence movement. Consistently, this novel, too, is written in Narayan's typical gentle comic style.

In this sense, Narayan's first novels can serve as an appropriate example of a sometimes humorous critique of colonial education. Three of the first four novels, *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The English Teacher* (1945), whose main characters can be seen as a single person at different developmental stages of life, echo events in the writer's life.

All three were written during the British Raj and in each the main protagonists, the boy Swami, the young man Chandran and the slightly older young man Krishnan, are involved in some kind of resistance to forces that inhibit the healthy development of their respective personalities as well as the fulfilment of a life based on the satisfaction of emotional, mental, intellectual and spiritual needs. Some of these are directly related to a significant factor that Swami, Chandran and Krishnan, each a kind of ‘incarnation’ of one

person, have in common – the Albert Mission College, where Swami and Chandran are students and where Krishnan is a teacher of English.

While Narayan does not present Swaminathan as a paragon of good behaviour or a particularly bright pupil, his portrayal of the boy's rebellion against the colonial teacher is both bitter and brilliantly comic:

The teacher bit his moustache and fired a second question, "What do you know about the Indian climate?" – "It is hot in summer and cold in winter." – "Stand up on the bench!" roared the teacher. And Swaminathan stood up without a protest. He was glad that he was given this supposedly degrading punishment instead of the cane. [... He] paid no attention to the rest of the lessons. His mind began to wander. Standing on the bench, he stood well over the whole class. He could see so many heads, and he classified them according to the caps: there were four red caps, twenty-five Gandhi caps, ten fur caps, and so on." (*Swami* 15)

The pink-faced headmaster of Chandran's college, named Brown, calls for "order" while, significantly, giving "an important lesson" on Greek drama in *The Bachelor of Arts* (3). Ironically, Chandran is supposed to develop the idea of "historians to be slaughtered first" in a class discussion, and since Narayan lets the boy develop the topic first in his thoughts, the irony of this can arguably be considered as coming quite close to bathos: "After about two hours of wandering he returned home, having thought of only one argument for killing historians first, namely, that they might not be there to misrepresent the facts when scientists, poets, and statesmen were being killed in their turn. It appeared to him a very brilliant argument. He could see before him a whole house rocking with laughter" (*Bachelor* 2).

Finally, while Krishnan, the protagonist of *The English Teacher* (1945), ironically refers to the headmaster of his college as "my good chief Brown", he finds irritating the emphasis the headmaster places on the "purity of the English language," the unacceptability of dropping a 'u' in *honour*, or otherwise "dotting the *i*'s and crossing the *t*'s" (2-4). The irony of using the name Brown for an Englishman in a position of power over the Indian teachers and students is obvious.

Perhaps the most striking example of a humorous critical treatment of the power structures that reflect colonialism can be found in Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), in which the protagonist Nataraj plies his trade as a printer in the second half of the 1950s, and in which Narayan brings the interaction of contradictory forces, already noticeable in his earlier work, to the utmost.

To this end, he draws on the Hindu concept of the duality of the contradictory yet cooperating forces and, as will be shown below, the Hindu myth of Bhasmasura.

Nataraj the printer, his personality and behaviour and the *inner* space of his press represent the traditional Indian values and even the *sacred*. There is an *outer* space that is open to visitors and customers, which is typically separated from the *inner* space by a blue curtain. The inner space, where the actual printing takes place, is reserved for Nataraj's

staff, among whom is Sastri, “an orthodox-minded Sanskrit semi-scholar” (Narayan, *Man-Eater* 72), a printer educated in the sacred Hindu texts, the very core of Indian Hindu tradition, and, in fact a kind of guru to Nataraj. No one else is allowed to enter these inner rooms, and even “[n]o one tried to peer through [the curtain]” (Narayan, *Man-Eater* 8).

Narayan is here ironizing the brutal intrusion of an antagonistic force alien to Malgudi, represented by a person called Vasu who has “violated the sacred traditions of my press” (*Man-Eater* 15). The description of this figure is an escalation of frightening features, leading to a kind of abrupt, surprising anticlimax: he is described as a “huge man” with a “bull-neck and hammer-fist” that gave a “hard grip,” a person who “came forward, practically tearing aside the curtain”, with “a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows, a large forehead and a shock of unkempt hair, like a black halo. – My first impulse was to cry out, ‘Whoever you may be, why don’t you brush your hair?’” (Narayan, *Man-Eater* 15). What may seem at first glance to be an insignificant detail here actually deserves a closer look: Narayan emphasises the situation when he ironizes it by having the protagonist focus on a trivial detail of a frightening appearance. By juxtaposing the gradations of the powerful and the frightening on the one hand and the bizarrely farcical, a trivial detail on which the protagonist focuses, on the other, Narayan deliberately creates bathos, which produces a comic effect, and even irony. Narayan’s emphasis on this situation foreshadows what will follow: Vasu, while wielding power over Nataraj and his neighbours, will, in fact, colonise their idyllic life and bring it to the point of destruction before being eliminated himself in the most comical of circumstances.

The novel is a skilful illustration of Narayan’s art of rewriting myths. In the myth of Bhasmasura, the demon is granted the boon of turning everyone he touches into ashes, and in his quest for power he is said to become dangerous to the whole world. A similar pattern can be dismantled when it comes to the destruction of Vasu, who is further characterised as a taxidermist, endowed with an enormous strength and a representative of purely pragmatic capitalist values, a man-eater, and who “makes the place all around him an object of knowledge in order to be able to become a master of the situation,” thus reflecting a typical coloniser’s frame of mind. (Volná 64; see also Foucault; Chrisman and Williams 7-9 qtd. in Volná 64) He is revealed as a representation of the mythical demon Bhasmasura, who ultimately destroys himself because of his vanity, while being deceived by Mohini the “Enchantress,” “the supreme celestial nymph,” an avatar of the god Vishnu. (Doniger 277)

Fakrul Alam aptly observes that “[i]n his use of Indian myths and legends Narayan is ironic in the postcolonial manner and not a traditionalist by any means” (19). Thus, in *The Man-Eater* the writer ironizes the destruction of Vasu, a representative of colonial ways, who, analogous to his mythical counterpart, becomes dangerous to the world of Malgudi, its inhabitants and values to the point of annihilation. This is symbolised by his attempted destruction of a sacred elephant. In the novel’s conclusion Narayan again employs bathos: the elaborate and protracted gradation of the pompous preparation of the religious procession, together with Nataraj’s repeated feverish efforts to prevent the killing results in Vasu’s death – as he waits with his gun at the window for Kumar the elephant to lead the procession ready to shoot him, he uses all his enormous strength to kill two

mosquitoes sitting on his forehead, thus killing himself. The ironic device of the bombastic, powerful, impressive and frightening being ridiculed by the small, trivial or insignificant here resolves a crisis that bears the hallmarks of a colonial situation, Narayan's tool becoming here a "universal irony informing the entire action as total seriocomic vision of the fate of man" (Surendiran and Jayapriya 1115).

If "[r]eading Narayan's early novels postcolonially [...] takes us," Fakrul Alam holds, "to stories of Indians living under colonial rule moulded by it in some instances, resisting it in others" (31), then the first three novels, which each depict respectively a pupil, a student and a teacher in a colonial educational institution, "constitute," while abounding in humorous situations and irony, "something of a bildungsroman of a colonial upbringing where we witness consistently ambivalent responses to induction into the colonized's culture" (13). Thus, for example, Krishnan the English teacher is not sure whether he should make his name in Tamil or English. A similar pattern can be discovered in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: while the novel can be read as a metaphor for the violent and destructive aspects of the colonial influence, Nataraj the printer finds himself in the end taking on some of the characteristics of Vasu. Interestingly, this apparent ambiguity can be interpreted in terms of the Hindu concept of duality and the cooperation of opposites.

If, "in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*," as Alam suggests, "Narayan's intentions are [...] much more complex than they may appear to be and his tone polyphonic" (26), this is even more evident in "Lawley Road" (1956), a short story that takes a humorous look at the grandiose patriotism of the immediate post-independence period. The story illustrates well how Narayan employs the comic in order to "explore postcolonial responsibility and record disappointments in building up the nation" while "providing nuanced views of societies emerging from colonial rule to postcoloniality" (Alam 31, 32).

The humour in this text lies in the sequence of unreasonably exaggerated, absurd or unusual situations, people's actions and reactions, while at the same time human frailties and failures are depicted. First, the Talkative Man, Narayan's narrator, portrays the post-Independence frenzy and the related actions that materialise in the apparent need to nationalise the names of streets and parks, which wreaks havoc in Malgudi:

Mahatma Gandhi Road was the most sought-after name. Eight different ward councillors were after it. There were six others who wanted to call the roads in front of their houses Nehru Road or Netaji Subash Bose Road [...] I believe, the Council just went mad. It decided to give the same name to four different streets. [...] The town became unrecognizable [...] people were not able to say where they lived or direct others there. The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone. – The Chairman was gratified with his inspired work – but not for long. He became restless again and looked for fresh fields of action. ("Lawley Road" 100)

If, as Alam claims, one of Narayan's themes is "coming to terms with independence and contemplating the legacy of Gandhi in a free country" (31), then in writing "Lawley Road" he does not resist the temptation, in this respect, to combine "irony with the

revelation of human psychology” (Parvati and Priya 95). The straightforward parody continues when an attempt is made to remove a statue of Sir Frederick Lawley, considered by the Malgudi Municipality to be “the worst tyrant imaginable: the true picture – with breeches and wig and white waistcoat and that hard, determined look” (Narayan, “Lawley Road” 101). But it is not easy to make a twenty-foot figure fall from a pedestal of molten lead: “They realized that Britain, when she was here, had attempted to raise herself on no mean foundation” (Narayan, “Lawley Road” 101). “A series of ironic complications enhance the comic effect,” in Parvati and Priya’s words (93), and when after a painful struggle the statue is finally toppled and taken to the Talkative Man’s house as a discarded object, the historical record reveals that “[w]e had all been misled about Sir F. All the present history pertained to a different Lawley of the time of Warren Hastings. This Frederick Lawley (of the statue) was a military governor who had settled down here after the Mutiny. He cleared the jungles and almost built the town of Malgudi” (Narayan, “Lawley Road” 103). This is followed by a detailed list of his good deeds for Malgudi and indeed the whole of India for which he was responsible, and he died trying to save the lives of the villagers in a flood.

As if this irony weren’t enough, the Municipality Chairman is treated in a thoroughly satirical manner at the end, when he is advised to use his corrupt money to buy the Talkative Man’s house with the lying statue and turn it into a national monument:

We arrived at a figure. He was very happy when he saw in the papers a few days later: “The Chairman of Malgudi Municipality has been able to buy back as a present for the nation the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. He proposed to install it in a newly acquired property which is shortly to be converted into a park. The Municipal Council have resolved that Kabir Lane shall be changed to Lawley Road” (Narayan, “Lawley Road” 105).

A postcolonial reading of Narayan cannot apply a totalising framework. It would only reduce the complexity of his fiction without taking into account the apparent paradoxes and pluralities of the text. Narayan’s ironic devices do not serve the purely nationalist readings because there is never a return to *purely* Indian values (Ashcroft et al. 109-115). As Alam observes, “Narayan is a writer whose strength, specifically, is providing nuanced views of societies emerging from colonial rule to postcoloniality” (32) and his “great theme, then, is not resistance to change but the inevitability and the problematics of change in a modernizing India” (16). Thus, the ironies in Narayan, rather than working exclusively “to the benefit of the Indian verities” (Ashcroft et al. 111) reflect the “Indians pursuing alternative models of nation-building” (Alam 31), and Narayan is true in his vision while “reflecting the way English rule had pervaded the life of the colonized, who, even as they struggle against it politically, had willingly or unwillingly accepted many aspects of the colonizer’s culture” (Alam 12).

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