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## HUMOUR AND IRONY IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN

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### Abstract:

R. K. Narayan enjoys imminent popularity both at home and abroad as one of the illustrious Indo-Anglian novelists and short story writers. R. K. Narayan is pre-eminently a storyteller. The keynote of R. K. Narayan's interest is his minute observation and subtle ironic, harmonious way of telling his story. Humour of Narayan is the direct course of his intellectual analysis of the contradictions in human experience tragically or comically.

The basic feature of every irony is a contrast between reality and its appearance. We get a glimpse of the complexity of life in his novels through irony of motives, characters, situations, and ideas. This paper focuses on R. K. Narayan's use of irony and humour as literary devices to protest, criticise and reject the ruling class and its culture in his early novels.

**Keywords:** Humour, Irony, Comic, Culture.

### Introduction

The term irony is a device of rhetoric and always implies some sort of discrepancy or incongruity. Though irony always implies the opposite of what is said, it has many gradations and only in its simplest forms does it mean only the opposite of what is said. There are many techniques for achieving irony. The writer may make it clear that the meaning he intends is the opposite of his literal one, or he may construct a discrepancy between an expectation and its fulfillment, or between the appearance of a situation and the reality that underlies it. Whatever his techniques, the writer demands that the reader perceive the concealed meaning that lies beneath his surface statement.

Saying the opposite of what one means is often confused with sarcasm and with satire. Sarcasm and satire both imply ridicule: one on the colloquial level, the other on the literary level. Sarcasm is simply bitter or cutting speech intended to wound the feelings. Satire is a more formal term usually applied to written literature with the purpose of bringing about reform in society. Sarcasm, we may say, is cruel as a bull is cruel. It intends to give hurt. Satire is like cruel and kind, as a surgeon is cruel and kind. It gives hurt in the interest of society. Irony is neither cruel nor kind. It is simply a device like a surgeon's scalpel for performing an operation more skillfully.

The simplest is the verbal irony or rhetorical irony. It occurs when the attitude of the writer is the opposite to that which is literally stated. We speak of irony of situation when a set of circumstances turns out to be the reverse of those anticipated or considered appropriate.

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan is perhaps the best known of Indian writers in English. Starting with *Swami and Friends*, Narayan has published several novels and collections of stories, and all of them have a peculiarly Indian ring about them and are set in the small imaginary South Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan's English style has been commended not only for its simplicity, lucidity and native flavour but also for its sense of humour, irony and satire.

*Swami and Friends* (1935), Narayan's first novel, is remarkable for his understanding of child psychology. About this book Graham Greene wrote:



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“It was Mr. Narayan with his *Swami and Friends* who first brought to India in the sense of the Indian population and the Indian way of life alive to me. Swami is the story of a child written with complete objectivity with a humour strange to our fiction, closer to Chekhov than to any English writer with the same underlying sense of beauty and sadness.”

Swaminathan, the young school student of sixth form, is the hero of this novel. Swami is a young playful boy who has enormous amount of fun with his friends Srinu, Mani, Sankar and Samuel. “The fault that he liked and admired the most in his class” (Narayan’s *Swami and Friends*, p. 6). Swami in *Life* takes a dramatic turn when Rajam, the son of Police Superintendent, comes into picture. R.K. Narayan does a wonderful job in bringing out Swami’s emotional psyche while he sincerely and innocently believes in the sanctity of friendship with Rajam. The novel is full of irony and delicate wit and also disturbing. The novel is set in a fictional British town Malgudi in South India around 1930. Through Swami’s eyes the reader gets to peak into the paradoxes of pre-independence days in South India.

The plot of “The Painter of Signs” is not particularly strong like much of Narayan’s work. Raman is a young sign board painter. His love affair with Daisy is handled truthfully, but also half seriously and half humorously. Raman’s comedic sexual desire for Daisy is really funny. But Daisy is a new woman. She fights for freedom, promotes equality and looks for her identity. There is no doubt that R.K. Narayan’s new woman has arrived and made an enduring impression on the Indian psyche.

Narayan’s novels are also rich in humour of dialogue i.e., wit and humour of characterization. Wit sparkles into most serene form in the conversation between Srinivas and his landlord in *Mr. Sampath*, or between Margayya and Dr. Pal in “*The Financial Expert*” or between Sri Ram and Bharathi in “*Waiting for Mahatma*” or between Raman and Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*. The most important aspect of Narayan’s comic vision is the use of irony as its comic framework.

He attempts to reveal the opposing dualities of speech and action, appearance and reality, expectation and fulfilment. We come across in his novels like *The Guide*, humour of the character, humour of situation, wit, irony and satire. Above all, humour is mingled with pathos and tragedy.

Narayan’s humour is intimately with a sense of irony. On many occasions this gentle irony broadens out into overt satire. For instance Raju, the central character in *Guide* draws a telling parallel between enforced sainthood and imprisonment. The description of the pandemonium surrounding the site of Raju’s penance sharply mocks the tendency of the Indians to turn every situation to a quasi-religious carnival. But there is nothing of bitterness about his satire.

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* there is humour of various kinds. Narayan takes delight in the expressive variety of life, mocks at its pretensions and the foolish bumbling attempts of his characters to overcome its difficulties.

Humour of character is the highest kind of humour and in the present novel this kind of humour largely results from the constant discomfiture of Nataraj. He remains a passive spectator as Vasu takes possession of his attic. Nataraj frets and fumes internally but is unable to set matters right. At Muthu’s tea stall, Nataraj is shown in a comic delight.

In all these cases humour also arises from the way in which actions, people and their motives are described by the novelist. The novelist’s ironic style is the source of humour in the description of Sastri as an all-rounder, as the person who manages single-handed all the different functions of the process of printing, but who is a very tyrant during an emergency.

Narayan’s satiric humour is seen in his exposure of the ways in which the adjournment lawyer fleeces his clients. The adjournment lawyer who charges exorbitant fees from Nataraj is an object of Narayan’s satiric humour.



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However, the classic example of Narayan's ironic satiric humour is provided by the exposure of the greedy ways of Indian astrologers. The temple procession is to be taken out and an astrologer is consulted as to the most auspicious date. The account of the process of consultation is ironical and most funny. The entire episode, the temple procession, the elaborate arrangements and the selection of an auspicious date for the purpose is an exposure of the superstitious nature of the Indian masses.

'The *Man-Eater of Malgudi*' is an allegory or fable showing that evil is self-destructive. The title is ironic for the man-eater in the novel is no tiger, but a mighty man, Vasu, the taxidermist who kills wild animals and stuffs their skins. He can also kill a man with a single blow of his hammer fist.

The significance of this action packed tale is to be explored not by stressing the importance of Vasu, a social evil, but in terms of the panic, hesitation, and resistance he generates in Malgudi, maybe in society at large. The destruction of this social evil, which is otherwise labelled "asura" or "Rakshasa", takes the form of a high comedy in which a disreputable woman 'Rangi', a temple elephant called 'Kumar' and curiously enough a mosquito play a crucial role. But there is a subtle irony here. Vasu, though a giant is afraid of mosquito, very early in the narrative when Sastri removes all the wastepaper from the attic in the press, Vasu tells Nataraj. The fellow has done you a service in carrying away all that wastepaper but he has dishoused a thousand mosquitoes; one thing I can't stand," and adds "night or day I run when a mosquito is mentioned."

But the irony is, this giant man-eater is killed by a blow of his own fist which he strikes at his head to kill a mosquito.

**To conclude:** Narayan is the greatest of humanists among the Indo-Anglian novelists. His humour is all pervasive and most varied. His vision of life is essentially comic, genial and kindly for he accepts life as it is with all its foibles and follies and is not carried away by the zeal of the reformer. Satiric humour is also there in his novels, but his satire is so mild and gentle. Narayan's novels, says William Walsh, "are comedies of sadness". With his limited language, he is yet able to evoke through all the appearance of stillness and strangeness a rhythm, the common rhythm of life as it is lived in South India. The bustle and vitality of that scene, the absurdities, the pretensions and the excitements of traditional routine are all brought out with the precious touch of irony.

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