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Malgudi Days : Stories of wit and humor

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Abstract: R. K. Narayan is considered one of the three best initial Indian authors who wrote in English; the other two were Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Narayan's world revolved around fiction but it blended the Indian mysticism and the ordinary life of people beautifully into it .He was known for his unpretentious and simple writing style. One of his fictional worlds is Malgudi, set in southern India. It shows the everyday life of its inhabitants through subtle prose, humor and gentle satire. R.K.Narayan was a great humorist and could bring about humour even in the mundane life of villagers. It is the humour and light hearted satire that made Malgudi Days a success. R.K Narayan's comic art was exceptional and that was the reason that Malgudi days is still considered one of the best compilations of short stories even today. The paper aims to show how humor and comedy added flavor to the writings of R K Narayan and remains an aspect that is all pervasive .His humor had a universal appeal and still seems fresh and creative.

Keywords : Comicality, Humor, Psychology, Perception, Human behavior, Satire.

R.K. Narayan was widely popular not only in India but in other countries as well especially in the UK and USA His works were even published by The British Council – He is the only Indian to achieve this distinction. Many of the short stories written by him were broadcasted by B.B.C. – which was a very rare distinction. University of Leeds and Delhi University honored him with the degree of D. Litt. He also won the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel The Guide (1958) in 1960 and The Indian Government awarded him with Padma Bhushan in 1964 for his achievements.

Narayan was born in Mysore, India, in 1906. His father who was an administrator and headmaster at government schools perhaps, instilled in Narayan a love for literature. He did not have much academic success. Realizing that academic life was not for him, Narayan turned to



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writing and started writing stories. After being turned down by several publishers, Narayan gave the manuscript of his first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), to a friend who showed the novel to Graham Greene, who was impressed by Narayan's work and found a publisher for the book. Narayan's writing career was born and the prolific writer went on to publish many novels, several volumes of short stories, collections of essays, and his memoirs, entitled *My Days* (1974).

Narayan has written short stories as well as Novels. Though he wrote novels as well, writing stories was his passion. He loved ordinary characters whose lives were simple and revolved almost around the same tracks. He loved to present the day to day incidents of their lives. Narayan himself has expressed his opinion about short stories in "Introduction" to his last collection of short stories in the following words: "I enjoy writing a short story. Unlike the novel, which emerges from relevant, minutely worked-out detail, the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea or climax."

Narayan's stories are entertaining and provide healthy refreshment for the brain. His stories are not complicated or tragic and neither are they thought provoking. The humor and mild satire provide relaxation to the mind. One forgets his own worries and sorrows. These stories are fun to read and can be enjoyed in every situation and condition. Initially Narayan started his career by writing stories for newspapers and magazines. The most important quality of his work is entertainment and above all its mass appeal. Though some of the critics found his work to be inferior to his contemporaries, his work was loved by the masses.

While comparing Narayan with other contemporary short story writers, Dr. Disha Sharma in *Short Stories of R.K. Narayan Themes and Techniques* writes: As a short story writer, Narayan's real strength as a stylist lies in his strong ironic sense. On the other hand, he obviously "lacks the flair for the imaginative and the passion for the profundities which Raja Rao offers or the kind of verbal exuberance and hearty gusto characteristic of 'Mulk Raj Anand'. The influence of journalism on the style of Narayan cannot be neglected-both the virtues and sins of journalistic writing are evident in his works. But at his best Narayan "Succeeds in turning his very limitations into artistic



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assets” Regarding his style in narration, Narayan seems to be at his strongest.; He is quite competent in the presentation of his dialogue, while the limitations of his style are betrayed when he tries to indulge in imaginative scene-painting, his descriptions of places usually being workman like rather than evocative.; No doubt, Narayan has written quite a good number of short stories, but unfortunately none of his short stories deserves the rank of universally acknowledged masterpieces. In this regard, his stories are inferior to those of Mulk Raj Anand or to those of Raja Rao.

But in spite of that his stories had a mass appeal and the general public enjoyed reading it and one of it is Malgudi days. Malgudi Days is a collection of short stories by R.K. Narayan published in 1943 and it was later republished in 1982 by Penguin classics. It includes 32 stories and all are set in the fictional town of Malgudi.

Perhaps it was due to its connection with the masses that his work, Malgudi days was adapted into a serial. It was its mass appeal that gave huge success to the serial. People who grew up watching the serial still remember it as a fond memory.

Malgudi days was made into a serial which was telecast on Doordarshan and it became a phenomenon when it first appeared on Doordarshan in the 80s. It was directed by the late Shankar Nag. The author, R K Narayan, had once described Malgudi as a town "habited by timeless characters who could be living anywhere in the world."Everything about *Malgudi Days* was remarkable -- it had the amazing stories, the sketches made by R K Laxman, talented Shankar Nag's direction, excellent performances by some of the most talented actors in Indian cinema, and amazing music by T S Vaidyanathan. Even today, those who have read the books and seen the serial remember each and every aspect of the serial. No doubt the stories were able to reach the masses only once they were converted into the television serial. Even the not so avid readers saw the serial and it was then that a part of the public got to know of the name R K Narayan. Since then it became a household name everyone knew Malgudi Days and its writer.



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Narayan's fiction revolves around the world of everyday events and the life of common people in a fictional place called Malgudi. He tells stories of ordinary people and their dilemmas and problems but there is sense of humor in all his narrations which makes the stories all the more interesting. Narayan's fiction is away from being overtly political and ideological. Though in some incidences we can feel a touch of satire as well. It has the problems as well as the practicality of an ordinary man's life.

Narayan gives his best when he blends satire with humor in particular, when he chooses a situation, which affects the common man's daily routine. He gives a detailed narration of such occasions and makes it all the more appealing. At some point the readers as well as the viewers of Malgudi Days could relate to those situations as if they occurred in their everyday lives.

His short story entitled "Lawley Road", which appears in both the collections Lawley Road(1956) and Malgudi Days(1982) is not just mild satire but was also rich in humour. Narayan narrates the activities of municipal council in a humorous style. He narrates how the Municipal Chairman of Malgudi tries to give a modern look to the town to celebrate the country's fifteenth Independence Day. R.K.Narayan describes the enthusiasm of the Municipal Chairman to celebrate this occasion: "He called up an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the names of all the streets and parks in honor of the birth of independence".

In this way board from Victoria Coronation Park was uprooted and a brand new sign stood in its place declaring it "Hamara Hindustan Park". It sounds much interesting when Narayan describes: The town became unrecognizable with new names. Gone were the Market Road, North Road, Chitra Road, Vinayak Mudali Street and so on. In their place appeared the names, repeated in four different places, of all the ministers, deputy ministers and the members of the Congress Working Committee.

R.K.Narayan's satire can be felt when he says: "The town became a wilderness with all its



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landmarks gone” . Narayan’s humour is at its best in this story when he describes in an amusing interesting way, how the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley is put on sale: “Statue for sale. Two and a half tons of excellent metal. Ideal gift for a patriotic friend. Offers above ten thousand will be considered.”

Malgudi Days represents the swift changes that the society which is chained in its old customs , traditions and superstitions, experiences. Malgudi with all the authentic and geographical details presents an intense impression of its society. His characters are trapped in the pressures of these fast changes. The Financial Expert(1952) remarks “. . . the life of Malgudi never ruffled by politics, proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, and the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character provide much of the comedy”.

The story “The Traill of Green Blazer” which is a part of Malgudi Days(1982) is full of wit , humor and irony. The character of Raju is itself hilarious. He is a Pick-pocket and keeps bluffing his wife that he is earning money from various businesses etc. When Raju reaches home with too much money, he had always to take care of his cash to conceal it in an envelope and shove it under a roof otherwise his wife asked too many questions and made him and her miserable. She firmly believes that the cash showed by her husband was commission that he earns in various businesses. So Raju continues with his profession and on one such occasion follows a gentleman with the green blazer.

Narayan not only adds humour in his stories but he also reflects the brighter side of human consciousness. Humans, who inspite of being engaged in several illegal activities have a heart and at several occasions it melts. Raju is an expert in pic pocketing but even his heart melts when he sees the toy balloon folded and tucked in the purse he steals from the man in the green blazer.His heart is filled with warmth and emotions for the child for whom it was kept.. Narayan describes Raju’s state of mind in an amusing way: “This is for a motherless boy. I have promised it him. If it bursts or gets lost before I go home, he will cry all night and I would not like it at all” (108).Therefore Raju tries to put the purse back in Green Blazer’s pocket and is caught red handed in the process. He is taken to police, beaten up but hee displays his wit in the following



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line: "I . . . I was trying to put back your purse". Raju resolves that he will never ever sympathize with anyone because: "Those fingers were not meant to put anything back"

C. Paul Verghese writes, "The instruments of his critical strategy are comedy, irony and satire. Narayan keeps very close to surface reality, for his aim is to reveal the tragic-comedy implicit in ordinary life. His problem is to give the reader a picture that strikes him as typical of everyday reality. For this he depends on selection. He, therefore, excludes from his picture such aspects of reality as are not susceptible to comic treatment."

In one of his other stories entitled "Wife's Holiday" in the collection *Malgudi Days*(1982) Kannan, the central character in the story feels extremely happy because his wife has gone to her parents. He feels happy alone at home. He humorously reflects: "If she were here, would she let me rest like this? Since his wife is not there he wants to go to Mantapam in the afternoon to gamble there to make his money double. He is enjoying the absence of his wife and like all husbands wants to celebrate it by staying away from home most of the day. But the tragedy was that he did not have enough money so in order to execute his wishes he starts looking for his wife's belongings.

The following lines add humor to his disdainful intentions. "An idea struck him and he suddenly rose to his feet and turned in. In a corner there was a large tin trunk, painted black years ago the most substantial possession of that household. It was his wife's. He sat down before it and stared at the lock helplessly. It was a cast iron lock with sharp edges. He took hold of it and, tugged at it, and much to his surprise, it came off. "God is kind to me," he told himself, and threw open the lid. (119).He finds his child's money box but before breaking it asks a question to himself "Am I right in taking my youngster's money?" "Why not?" whispered a voice within seductively. "Son and father are the same."

R.K. Narayan's characters are not out of the real world. They are very much from the normal world and perhaps that is the reason people could relate to those characters somewhere. His characters appear real with real problems and situations. R.K. Narayan himself writes in author's Introduction to *Malgudi Days* (1982), "I can detect Malgudi's characters even in Newyork . . ." He loves the



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oddities and eccentricities of his characters and laughs at them and the reader loves to read the contagion of his humanism. As Shiv K. Gilra writes in his book, “They are full of wit, humor and irony and provide a pleasurable and individual aesthetic experience for the reader”

Another character worth the name is Dr. Shankar of medical hall, in the English teacher. To Krishnan he is not merely the family doctor but also “the greatest physician on Earth”. He is introduced by Narayan with the usual touch of comicality: “he looked like a film star being mobbed by admirers. He waved his hand, smiled, and gently pressed all his admirers back to their seats”.

Another funny story is “An astrologer’s day “. It is a hilarious story because it is about a man who uses his wit and cunningness to predict people’s future despite having no knowledge of astrology. The protagonist is a gambler and a murderer and the irony is that he himself is ignorant of his own future but becomes an astrologer.

Narayan through subtle sarcasm reveals how the only qualification needed to be an astrologer in India is to be dressed in saffron clothes, a few charts, tilak on the forehead and he should just have a keen observation of people along with a great presence of mind.

Many critics have written about the limitations of Narayan's short story writing, but his immense popularity as a short story writer in India as well as abroad proves that the critics were wrong in their judgement. R. K. Narayan’s sole objective was to entertain his readers with light hearted stories and he fully succeeded in it. His characters appear real and somehow leave a positive message for the readers. It makes them realize that life can be enjoyed even in adverse conditions. His stories give the readers hope as they are able to connect with the characters. Narayan has a pragmatic approach to life. He teaches people to love life and enjoy it no matter what the situation is.

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