

**Humour in R.K. Narayan's Select Short Stories – A Bird's Eye View**

**Dr. V. Sudhakara Reddy**

*Lecturer in English, S.V. Degree College, Kadapa Town, Kadapa District, (Andhra Pradesh)  
India*

**Abstract**

Narayan is pre-eminently a story teller. His stories are not only interesting in themselves but are very suggestive in the sense that they are a creative comment on contemporary reality. His world is not a series of scenes and characters but a composite and organic whole in which each forms a part and parcel of total life. The stories chosen in the study are interesting and they arrest easily the reader's attention. The endings of all these stories give scope for thought. There is a definite ending to each story in which Narayan sometimes follows O' Henry's technique that is sudden reversal of the situation.

The main aim of writing these stories is to provide aesthetic satisfaction to his readers. Narayan uses the life around him as an inspiration to his art. He admires what is right, proper and beautiful in human conduct. He has no other motive than giving his readers the delight and joy of art. It is difficult to pin a label on Narayan as a writer. He has been called an Indian Chekov, a satirist, a purveyor of amusing oddities. No writer has so accurately and so repeatedly picked the bubbles of illusion and self deception in his Indian characters. His strength as a writer, lies in his ability to portray life. He is inimitable in his portrayal of lower middle class society. His novels and short stories present a kaleidoscopic variety of life.

The paper highlights the presentation of humour in select short stories of R.K. Narayan.

The perennial appeal of Narayan as a writer is due to his genius for humour. Narayan has been delighting his countless readers with his particular brand of humour for decades. *New Statesman* and *Nation* put him among the greatest humourists in literature. Narayan writes in the main stream of the great comic tradition. And one cannot forget Graham Greene's oft-quoted comparison of Narayan's humour with Chekhov's.

Narayan who has trained his mind with the western tradition of comedy has been successful in kindling the spirit of comedy in his readers. He has made some interesting remarks about the rise of comic tradition in India. He feels that it is the

Indian freedom struggle which drew the comic writers away from their sphere of work. He illustrates that the muse of comedy can contemplate human deficiency with sympathy and charity. The incongruous and the absurd in life only amuse him. He accepts life with all its imperfections, eccentricities, and follies. He successfully transports this spirit to his readers without any didacticism. He never tries to obtrusively contrive to entertain or instruct. The sympathetic humour and broad humanity of Narayan has no parallel in Indian English fiction. Comic vivaciousness has humanized Narayan's vision. The secret of his success derives from the unusual combination of his

‘comic sense and religious sensibility.’ Girdla observes, “This Indian author’s name by now holds considerable promise for British readers: it stands for a blend of the lyrical with the funny... He is amused by life, the life he sees around him for its own sake – and what could be a better attitude for an artist?” (Girdla, 89) In *Swami and Friends* Narayan defines the bond between Swami and his friend. “The bond between them was laughter. They were able to see together the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The most trivial and unnoticeable thing to others would tickle them to death.” (Narayan, 9) This represents Narayan’s view of life. He surely finds amazing absurdities in trivial things. He navigates us through an endless sea of ludicrous and absurd situations. The passage of time and the ceaseless output have failed to diminish the invigorative spirit behind his freshness of vision.

Narayan finds plenty of comedy in the normal eccentricities of Malgudi life. Malgudi Days, not nights. The subject in these Malgudi days beams from beneath his brow and its lights are generous and steady and benign. Narayan strongly believes that a tale, above all, should enchant implicitly by affecting an imaginative escape from everyday worries despite its very portrayal of them. He taps the sources of humour to entertain and enlighten his readers. But one hardly realizes how extremely difficult it is to amuse and enchant one’s readers with humour.

Humour often occurs from the situation or character or language. All these are found in varying degrees in a given framework, though one or the other may appear predominantly.

In stories like “Lawley Road,” “Engine Trouble,” “Like the Sun” and “Cat Within” we find the central situation to be extremely amusing. It is the humorous incident which is the focus of the author and the character is only peripheral. Here the narrative itself is placed at the service of comedy. It is as though the comic muse has invaded the narrative and pitched her tents here and released humour from her plentiful store. Narayan is an adept at this and the very way in which he narrates his stories creates its own humour. The reader is caught up in the racy narration of Narayan. Thus the humour ebbs out in the narration. We find the protagonists of “Engine Trouble,” “Lawley Road” and “Like the Sun” trying to adapt themselves to the situation. We even find that the difficulties are accidental rather than foreordained. It is obvious that destiny in the guise of fortune is comic and destiny in the guise of fate would be tragic. We have an excellent example of Fate as absolute millstone, hilariously mocked in the Engine Trouble.

The joyous sense of life, therefore, is created by a plot showing successful adaptations to one misfortune after another. We notice that all the situations or the troubles faced by the characters in “Engine Trouble” or “Like the Sun” or “Lawley Road” or the cat in the “Cat Within” are painless. Narayan adopts the technique of making the ‘suffering’ merely ‘discomfort.’ According to Aristotle, “comedy deals with that spices of the ugly which is not painful: to wit, the ridiculous.” (Colwell, 42) Narayan makes the suffering either unreal or trivial and allows the otherwise painful events to seem funny.

Narayan relies on the traditional source of humour for his comic effect in the “Engine Trouble.” The perception of incongruity the juxtaposition of objects totally unrelated to each other –provides much of the humour. A road roller as a prize in a lottery is incongruous. The series of troubles that ensue from such a situation is what constitutes the story. In all the three stories, the Talkative Man of the “Lawley Road” or Sekhar of “Like a Sun” or the Talkative Man of the “Engine Trouble” have incongruous naiveté—a quality which becomes a comic device in Narayan. These heroes have what is called ‘Charlie Chaplin Streak.’ The hero is exposed as a man unequal to the situation. Like Charlie Chaplin he finds himself in a world which is too complicated, or too exacting for him. Narayan’s world is a comedian’s delight with a wide range of human absurdities. He is content with his harmless with which he passes on generously, and generally ably, to his readers.

Although Narayan practices his conviction that one of the main functions of humour is to draw attention to the absurdities and contradictions seen in public life, his humour is humane and gentle. The humour arising out of the confusion of the public mind at the time of Indian Independence movement is well portrayed in the “Lawley Road.” Narayan’s skill as a humorist is at its best when he blends humour and satire. He satirizes the foibles of the individuals against the framework of certain values he upholds. As William Walsh puts it, “Tracts of human experience are looked at with an affectionately ridiculing eye, and with that kind of humour in which the jokes are also a species of moral insight.” (Walsh, 66)

The comedy is often created by the ridiculousness of the situation wherein the character gets into an activity which is incongruent. Even though Narayan laughs at the laughable foibles of human nature, because of his love for humanity the satire hardly pricks. His satire does not lash or lacerate his characters. The ambiguity often found in life is kept quite lively, because of the comedy in them.

Thus humour has a social context in so far as it works as a critic and censor, laughing at social evils or absurdities with a view to correcting them. The humour of a “Cat Within” is not of a high order. It offers a good change from the rigmarole, but it is not of the quality one enjoys in “Lawley Road”. But one can recall that Narayan initially started his career by contributing articles to journals. That stamp of a magazine story is still retained in “Cat Within”. In Character Humour, the character is the centre of interest. “Attila” and “Flavour of Coconut” exemplify this kind of humour. Both these stories centre on their central characters—one a rat and the other a dog. “Flavour of Coconut” written in the mock-heroic style with a sustained serious tone offers sheer fun. An important trait in Narayan’s writings is his comic approach to things and life. His talent is best suited for ludicrous comedy. He pushes everything into the furnace of his imagination and there comes out a totally humorous picture.

In both “Attila” and “Flavour of Coconut” we find incongruity as the source of humour. One has an emotional shock due to what one expects and what one finds. The recognition of the wide difference between what is and what ought to be produced is refreshing and invigorating humour. Attila is named after the scourge

of Europe, but it does not even whimper. After three fourths of the story in the “Flavour of Coconut,” one realizes that the court scene has no criminal, but only a small rat. The recognition between the normal situation and the incongruity creates ripples of laughter throughout. There is also verbal humour in the stories of Narayan. His narration in “Fellow-Feeling” – an encounter of two people of different castes having a verbal fight is an entertaining piece of misunderstanding. There is real amusement artfully told and carefully executed. Oliva Manning notes that “Fellow-Feeling” is endearing for its “delightfully funny squabble.” (Manning, 3) It appears that the story “Fellow-Feeling” is a highly delightful piece. William Walsh says: “The serious and the comic flow in and out of one another throughout is an intricate, inseparable alliance.” (Walsh, 66) But in his short stories, Narayan gives pleasure out of proportion either to the subject matter or the skill with which they are put together. He has enlarged the boundaries of comic art and widened its scope. On one occasion he says: “the ... mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul, and above all, the detached observation” (Narayan, 101) that form the subject of fiction.

The predominant feature of Narayan’s writing is humour. It comes through easily and impressively in all his stories with the exception of stories like ‘A Shadow,’ ‘Another Community,’ and ‘Mother and Son.’ He is at his best in ‘A Horse and Two Goats,’ ‘A Breath of Lucifer,’ and ‘The Cat Within.’ He employs various techniques like irony, satire, exaggeration, reversal, in order to make them totally

humorous. His unalloyed humour is present in these stories. In ‘A Horse and Two Goats’ he presents the very poor living conditions in a village. In ‘Cat within’ he shows the condition of the urban lower middle class and ‘A Breath of Lucifer’ he brings together the very poor and rich as characters. Thus a study of Narayan’s stories offers a variety of themes presented in a very alluring fashion. Narayan wrote a beautiful feature on ‘Statues.’ This had been telecast in Malgudi days on Doordarshan. Narayan says, ‘A Horse and Two Goats’ was inspired by a real incident. A foreign diplomat – came to visit him in Mysore with an enormous clay horse squeezed into the back seat of his station wagon. It occupied so much space that the official’s entire family had to crush themselves into the front seat.

Narayan’s comic irony is evident in the story – ‘A Horse and Two Goats.’ The predominant theme of this story is the purchase of a clay horse by an American. The communication gap and the language problem of two men are conveyed here. Muni a one time affluent shepherd who owned a flock, lives a couple of miles away from his village. As his fortune declines from a flock of forty, his stock comes down to two goats. He is a very poor man. He speaks of himself thus, ‘I am the poorest fellow in our caste and no wonder they spurn me.’

One day when he sits at the pedestal of a big clay horse he meets an American. The American visits India every year because he is interested in India. The clay horse attracts him so much and he thinks Muni owns it. He wants to buy the horse as it would be a decorative piece. The foreigner speaks in English and Muni

speaks Tamil and since there is no one to translate their conversation, the situation creates laughter. Their conversation is carried on two different planes which makes Muni think that an offer is being made for his goats. The American thinks that clay horse belongs to Muni, detaches the horse and carries it away in a truck and pays Muni a hundred rupees. Muni thinks that he had sold away his goats. When Muni goes home and explains the whole thing to his wife and shows her the money, he hears the goats at the back door. Muni's wife suspects him of stealing money.

Narayan's major eye operation which was a traumatic experience provided him with material for a hilarious short story. He tells us in the prologue that this story is based on his own experience. Here, the narrator is dependent on Sam until the bandages on his eyes are removed. The narrators' difficulty in understanding or reading the life of another character is brought out. The characters are seen to be entering into each other's nightmares, one as a result of blindness and the other from drunkenness.

The story deals with a simple uneducated, sincere, hard working faithful servant. Sam a Christian male nurse or attendant, serves his master with scrupulous care. But he leaves his master in the end in an unceremonious way. His company and conversation inspire his master to write this story, where there is sense of horror, suspense and also comedy. The story reveals the misreading or misunderstanding of two characters and also stands in comparison with 'A Horse and Two Goats' where there is a misunderstanding created by two different languages. Sam's appearance as Lucifer coincides with the patient's longing for the

restoration of his health. The story is written in first person and it opens thus:

"How do you look like?

How can I say? Several years since I looked at mirror!

Why so?

The women at home do not give us a chance." (Narayan, 116)

These sentences make the story humorous.

The story 'Cat Within' starts with a simple theme of a Cat – putting its head in a jug and ends sarcastically involving all the villagers. It moves on two different planes. The conversation is akin to the conversation of the story 'A Horse and Two Goats.' It also appears in Narayan's collection *Malgudi Days* besides *Stories Old and New*. Through this story Narayan brings about the problems of the lower class people but they are conveyed in a comic way. The exorcist in this story is akin to the hero of 'An Astrologer's Day.' Both of them elicit information from their clients. 'Cat within' brings together an exorcist, a stingy landlord and numerous tenants on a dark night as a cat is caught in a jug. After much commotion they all discover that it not a ghost but only a cat. The exorcist then pronounces his opinion. 'Yes, it may appear to be a cat. How do you know what is inside the cat?'

Narayan in most of his stories, created a brilliant character called the Talkative Man. He is an imaginary character, confident and boastful. He narrates unbelievable stories of adventure. The Talkative Man is a reflection of Narayan, his creator. The main intention of the Talkative Man is to impress the audience with his talkativeness. His stories have an element of drama, suspense and they

easily rouse reader's curiosity. With a fantastic element of truth, his stories fulfill the need of human nature like a quest for adventure, extravagant experience which is in total contrast with mundane life. There is an extraordinary sparkle in these stories which helps as men travel in world of wonder. C.V. Venugopal says, "Narayan borrows from our ancient techniques the idea of narrator too in quite a few of his stories. The incidents are narrated by the character called the 'Talkative Man' who is modern prototype of Bodhisattva of 'Jataka Tales' preset in a dozen diverse places in dozen divers forms." (Venugopal, 76)

Narayan's story 'Lawley Road' falls under the category of Talkative Man stories. It deals with the muddle headedness of the municipality. 'Engine Trouble' also deals with municipality. The story 'Night of the Cyclone' which is narrated by Talkative Man is thoroughly amusing. 'Tiger's Claw' is noted for suspense and curiosity throughout. These stories start with the line 'The Talkative Man said.'

'Tiger's Claw' deals with an adventure which may not have taken place. There is a tone of boastfulness in narration. Talkative Man says that a tiger entered the railway station and caused panic. The narrator hides himself under a table where he spent the whole night. The Talkative Man has many attentive listeners for his narration. Here he is an agent of a fertilizer company who goes on a camp and spends a night in a railway station where he meets a tiger and in order to save himself cut claws from the tiger's paw. This story is a simple but every effective story. Narayan frees himself from responsibility by creating the 'Talkative Man' as narrator. The Talkative Man

narrates an incident which does not take place in daily life but only once in a life time. This is the medium through which the interest of the reader is aroused. The ending is ironical. The tiger in the Talkative Man's story appears as the 'hero' of Narayan's most important and mature novel *A Tiger for Malgudi*.

'Lawley Road' is a story in which Narayan makes fun of the municipality in Malgudi. The story is narrated quite humorously by the 'Talkative Man,' who tells how Kabir lane came to be named as 'Lawley Road.' It is about municipal council deciding to commemorate the Independence Day by renaming the names of all the streets and parks. The statue of Sir Fredrick Lawley is taken down and is hopefully acquired by a man who hopes to sell it for a big profit. The statue causes endless trouble and misfortune. In the meanwhile the municipal council is reminded that Sir Fredrick Lawley was a benefactor and not a tyrant and that the government demanded that the statue should be reinstated. People become active and call the narrator a black marketer and picket his house. Finally it is agreed that the chairman should buy it.

The situational humour lies in the Chairman's offer of the statue to narrator free of cost. The narrator takes it home and the statue is lodged in his small house. Now the story takes a new turn and the chairman comes to the narrator along with a heap of telegrams and says that government wants to reinstate the statue. The narrator does not agree to part with it. He declares 'This is my statue and I shall keep it. I love to collect statues of national heroes.' The narrator sends away his wife and children to the village in order to make room for the statue. The narrator allows to

take the statue only if he is paid the expenses for bringing it home. He puts a placard and hangs it to the door. "Statue for sale. Two and a half tons of excellent metal."<sup>24</sup> The narrator asks the Chairman to make his house as a place of national interest because it is difficult to take the statue back to its original place and offers to give his house and statue for a reasonable price. Here also we see situational humour because in the beginning the Chairman offers the statue free of cost and now the narrator offers the statue and his house for a reasonable price. The Chairman agrees to take the statue because he thinks that it is cheaper to buy the statue instead of spending a lot of money to fight a new election. The plot of the story is very simple. There is ease and smoothness in the language. The background of the story is made clear in the opening paragraph. Narayan exposes the confusion and muddle headedness of the legislator.

'Engine Trouble' is about a man who stands outside a whirlpool of events and commitments. The narrative style is full of comic touches. There is ease and smoothness in the language itself. As a master of comedy Narayan employs devices of exaggeration and anti-climax in 'Engine Trouble.' The story is narrated in the first person. It is about a man who wins a road engine in a lottery and encounters problems in carrying away the engine. At last an earthquake solves all his problems. In this small story Narayan narrates three incidents, an exhibition, display of yoga by a Swamiji and finally an earthquake which brings all the problems to an end.

Winning a prize through a lottery is a pleasant surprise for a poor man but winning a road engine is an added

expenditure for a poor man. In the collection 'Lawley Road' there are many stories dealing with the miseries of a common man. When the narrator wins the prize and is in deep trouble his friends and well wishers stream into congratulate him on his latest acquisition. The narrator himself tells that he grew very fond of it, loved its shining brass parts. He stands near it and pats it affectionately. As a poor man he thinks that his troubles are coming to an end but he is so ignorant that he does not guess that his troubles have just begun. After a few days he receives a notice from the municipality to remove the engine. Otherwise they would charge rent for the occupation of Gymkhana grounds. After a deep thought he prepares to pay a rent of rupees ten a month. It is pathetic as the house he and his wife occupied costs him only four rupees a month.

Fresh complication arises when a cattle show comes to be held in the gymkhana grounds. He was given twenty four hours time to get rid of the engine. He also approaches the station master to put in a word with the engine driver but the engine driver points out that he has his own locomotive. Then the narrator meets the priest of the temple and manages to gain his sympathy who offers the services of his temple elephant. He also engages fifty coolies to push the engine from behind. The coolies want eight annas per head and the temple elephant costs him seven rupees a day and a feed. His plan was to take the engine out of gymkhana grounds and then place the engine in a field owned by his friend. He takes the services of his friend Joseph to steer the locomotive. It is a pleasant sight when the temple elephant is yoked to the engine and fifty determined men push behind and his friend Joseph sits

at a driving seat. A huge crowd stands around and watches in great glee. The engine begins to move and it is a great moment in his life. At this the crows let out a joyous yell. The elephant disliking the behaviour of the crowd's trumpets loudly, snaps its ropes and kicks down a further length of the wall. The fifty men flee in panic and the owner of the compound wall slapped on the faces. The police arrive and take him to the station.

Narayan in a humorous way lists out the difficulties that await the narrator when he was released from lockup, compound wall to be built, wages of fifty men, Joseph's fee and medical treatment of temple elephant. At last nature comes to his rescue. The narrator decides to go to his village and before going he wants to have a final look and to his great surprise, the engine is found in a disused well nearby with its back up. When the narrator is praying to heavens to save him from fresh complication, the owner of the house comes to him and says that it is a great service to him because the municipality is sending notice to close it and that he is dreading the cost of closing it. The owner is happy as the engine fits the well like a cork. The owner offered to withdraw all the complaints and charges against the narrator and build the broken wall himself. He agrees to pay all the expenses and that was the end of the engine troubles.

There is a thematic connection between the story 'Engine Trouble' and the hero of the story 'Lawley Road' as both deal with municipality. The hero of the story 'Lawley Road' sends away his wife and children to make room for the statue. But in the story 'Engine Trouble' the hero in order to meet the expenses, plans to send away his wife to her father's place. Even

the hero of the 'Astrologer's day' wants to run away to another village in order to avoid all the troubles.

'A Night of the Cyclone' is narrated by 'The Talkative Man' with the background of Visakhapatnam. Malgudi is the hero of Narayan's works but few stories are written with the background of Madras, Mysore and Visakhapatnam. This story figures in Narayan's two collections *Lawley Road* and *Stories Old and New*. A Night of the Cyclone is a comic story narrated by the Talkative Man. It may be termed as a descriptive comedy, the keynote of which is exaggeration, 'the prerogative of humorists.' It is a descriptive account of a storm in the life of the narrator. The narrator describes the storm in its full swing. The story starts with difficulties and ends with happiness, because the storm brings a new born babe into the narrator's family. He writes about an ordinary man who works as supervisor with a meagre salary. He says that the world is going to end that day and asks his wife to take only her best sarees. The very poor, working and middle class provide Narayan with the material necessary for his stories. In addition to that, he presents problems of the middle class, young, old in total disarray. As Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observes, "Narayan himself is a product of the Hindu middle class, sharing the beliefs, superstitions and perhaps the prejudices of his class in a small town and viewing its going on with sympathy." (Iyengar, 358)

Narayan prefers his characters to speak, act and leaves the rest to our fancy. They are kind, considerate, witty, meditative, vacillating, weak and procrastinating. They are generally balanced and able to overcome temptations that come their way.

Narayan writes about common problems like dowry, unemployment, poverty, economic exploitation etc. The joys and sorrows of the middle class and their misery are superbly and neatly portrayed.

Thus, an examination of Narayan's stories studied under several categories reveals the amazing variety and richness of common human experience immortalized by the master story teller.

**Works Cited:**

1. C. Carter Colwell, ed *A Student Guide to Literature* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968).
2. C.V. Venugopal, *The Indian Short Story in English: A Survey*.
3. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English,* R.K. Narayan,' (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983).
4. Olivia Manning, "Short Stories," *The Spectator*, 11 July, 1947.
5. R.K. Narayan, *Old and New* .
6. R.K. Narayan, Quoted by S.C. Harrex, "Eccentric Norms: Tradition and Comedy in the fiction of R.K. Narayan," *CRNLE*, 23 March, 1978.
7. R.K. Narayan, *Swami and Friends* (Mysore: India Thought Publications, 1986).
8. Shiv. K. Gilra, *R.K. Narayan – His Mind and His Art* (Meerut: Saru Publishing House)
9. William Walsh, "R.K. Narayan: The Unobtrusive Novelist," *Review of National Literatures-India* 10, ed, Anne Paolucci, (New York: Council on National Literatures, 1979).