

“Psychological perceptions of humour in R. K. Narayan’s works”

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ABSTRACT

Humour means something funny and enjoyable. It is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provide laughter and amusement. Wit and humour denotes species of comic. Wit is the mental faculty of intelligence or inventiveness. R. K. Narayan uses his wit to produce humour in his novels. Psychological perceptions of humour in Narayan’s novels can be appreciated for his concepts involved in-depth research with many angularities of literary perceptions. The highest level of research has exhibited the range of literary ideas which had gone up to the extent of scientific verification of ideas in the right kind of grits and guts coupled with intellectual powers. He pokes fun at the ironies of everyday problems of a common man. He was totally involved in the genres of humour without being affected by the struggle for independence. He had the vision of going in depth of person’s agony in a particular situation. His characters produce comicality when the right man responsible for a wrong thing and vice-versa and man’s awareness of his self importance and attempt to be equal to the look despite the incongruity for such in his craze for personal distinction. Narayan’s perception of the uncommon in the common is still a success. An attempt is made to discuss the perceptions of humour seen in the situations, descriptions, narrations and dialogues resulting in psychological evolution in the selected novels written by R .K. Narayan leading to the improvement of thought on human life.

Keywords: Humour, Comicality, Cognitive experiences, Perception, Psychological evolution.

The main objective of this research is to study the effect of humor on the mind of the reader in R. K. Narayan's writings. The psychological perceptions are brought about by deep analysis of his various works. Some of the psychological benefits of laughter are as follows.

Laughter is the best medicine. The health benefits of Humour and Laughter: Humor is infectious. The sound of roaring laughter is far more contagious. When laughter is shared it binds people together and increases happiness. Humour and laughter strengthen the immune system, boost energy, diminish pain and protect from the damaging effects of stress. Best of all, this priceless medicine is fun, free and easy to use.

“Your sense of humour is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health” - Paul E. McGhee

There are many physical health benefits of laughter such as, boosting immunity, lowering the stress hormones, decreasing pain, relaxing muscles and preventing heart diseases. Mental health benefits of laughter are it adds joy and zest to life, eases anxiety and fear, relieves stress, improves mood, and enhances resilience. Laughter and humor helps to stay emotionally healthy. Laughter makes us feel good, positive, with an optimistic outlook through difficult situations, disappointments and loss, respite from sadness and pain, gives courage and strength to find new sources of meaning and hope. It dissolves distressing emotions, relaxes and recharges. Humour shifts perspective, to see situations in a more realistic, less threatening light. A humorous perspective creates psychological distance, which can help avoid feeling overwhelmed. Psychological benefits of humour linked to theoretical bases and substantiated by situation, dialogues from R.K. Narayan's works.

As quoted in The Deccan Chronicle Hyderabad, Wed 27, Oct 2010 “Teen tonic: Tickle Trouble away: Humor is what youngsters opt to laugh their way out of rough times and bouts of blues” - Hemant Abhishek.

“A smile is a curve that sets everything straight”, stands true whenever the going gets tough and in case of teenagers whose experiments with life can irk parents and teachers, the ability to use humour and wit can go a long way in pulling them out of a sticky situation. Being funny in rough time can be really rewarding, says American T.V personality, Mark Thomas, in her latest book, ‘Growing up Laughing’ - My story and the story of funny man. She talks about her upbringing as the daughter of comedian Danny Thomas and explains the importance of humour saying, “It's a gift to be able to make people laugh. A student recalls how humour bailed him out when he was hauled up by cops at a police picket. The policeman burst out laughing and let them off with a warning not to do triple riding again.

Humour sometime works like a good icebreaker. Milind Baghel, 17 year old finalist of the comedy show ‘Chhote Miyan’ adds that it not only increases one's social circle, but can also make one famous among friends. He says ‘humour is certainly helpful in keeping everyone around smiling. At times he cracks a few jokes to make the teacher laugh. Lightening the mood with jokes and humour can keep trouble away at home too, whenever

parents are in bad mood over something. It's important to lighten the mood before any one is punished. One should develop the habit of cracking jokes and having fun. It lifts spirits all around.

In this article the focus is about how comedy helps in lifting the spirits, against bad mood, anger in our day to day life. Sometimes it becomes a savior from punishment so we need to develop humour as well as utilize it wherever needed, whether among friends or family members. A laugh a day keeps the doctor away. Swami was asked to solve a simple Math's problem during holidays. (Narayan, 1935, p 83) He goes to the depth of the problem and makes it more complicated and ends up getting a wrong answer. Swami's nervousness is pictured here while solving math sums and the misery of homework he had to undergo during holidays. (p 182) Father challenges Swami to sleep alone in his office room to show him courage. Swami tries to escape from this frightful proposition and tries to go to bed early, he tells his grandmother not to call him even if the house is on fire. Imagination of the situation makes reader laugh. When (Narayan, 1935, p.187) Swami caught hold of the notorious thief when he was sleeping alone in the office room, he was greatly admired by everybody for his bravery. He became a role model for other children.

In the Bachelor of Arts, (1937, p.11, 68, 84) "He realized that what he usually did was a piece of evasive cowardice act worthy of an adolescent, at twenty to be afraid of one's parents and adopt sneaky ways". Chandran and his friend go to watch movie and return late at night. Adolescents adopt sneaky ways to get into the house as they are afraid of their parents. "He would be unworthy of Malathi if he was going to be such a spineless worm afraid of his father"? Chandran falls in love with Malathi and he wants to marry her but he could not express his feelings to his father. He curses himself for being a spineless worm. "Chandran sat biting his nails" but mother, you won't create difficulties over the dowry?" The technique used by Narayan to evolve humour in the character of Chandran makes reader laugh, that is, the nervous behavior of Chandran biting nails. He tells his mother not to create difficulties over the dowry. He wants to marry Malathi desperately as he had fallen in love with her.

"If the girl is not bad looking and if you are getting some money into the bargain why don't you marry?" Mohan said to Chandran. (Narayan, 1937, p 108) Mohan advises Chandran to see the bride and get married. Chandran wanted to marry a beautiful girl who resembled Malathi. In turn he would get some money in return Narayan's technique of poking fun at simple incidents in our life is very amusing. Hindu customs are observed as often as they are ignored is shown with gentle humour. The reader enters a subtle and rewarding world bright with the color of difference.

After the death of the old man the brothers fell out, their wives fell out, and their children fell out. They could not tolerate the idea of even breathing the same air or being enclosed by the same walls. (Narayan, 1958, p.9-10) A humorous situation is that "Everything that could be cut into two with an axe or scissors or a knife was divided between them". Margayya and his brother shared the property by dividing everything. Margayya's son

drew near the lamp, gingerly putting his finger nears the metal plate on the top” he let out a shriek. Margayya felt embarrassed like a man caught shirking a duty when his wife scolds him.

Balu, son of Margayya was playing with the lamp which was lit; he touched the hot metal plate and let out a shriek. Margayya quickly attends to his burnt finger. When his wife scolds him, he felt embarrassed for not performing his duty properly. “This is the worst of begetting sons late in life” They pet them and spoil them and make them little monsters” People are of opinion that if the children are born late to the parents, they are spoiled by them. Situation of children getting spoiled is humorous. (Narayan, 1958, p .13, 19) Balu became a spoiled brat. Margayya’s brothers’ family commented that when children are born late in life, parents spoil them and they become monsters. “I look like a wayside barber with this little miserable box under my arm”. Margayya thought that a financier like him was looking like a barber carrying a box under his arm. Then the child stamped his heel on the ink and it splashed over Margayya’s face and spoiled the entire book. ‘Boy darted sideways to the edge of the gutter and flung red book into the gutter’. (Narayan, 1958, pp. 39-40)

Margayya’s son Balu was a spoiled brat. He always troubled his parents. He spilled the ink on accounts book, snatches it and throws it into the gutter. The situation creates sidesplitting laughter in the reader. “You don’t seem to be in your senses since last night (wife) ‘I am not and if you try to imply that I have been drinking or spending the night in a brothel, I have you free to think so.’”(Narayan, 1958, p 43) Narayan uses the technique of imagination in his character when Margayya was quarrelling with his wife for reaching late in the night.

“He felt angry at the thought of examinations; they were a curse on the youth of the nation, the greatest menace that the British had brought with them to India”. Margayya curses Britishers for having introduced the exams in educational institutions because his son was unsuccessful in passing the exams. (Narayan, 1958, p 156, 162) “People sat on each other’s laps, hung by each other’s necks, curled themselves on luggage racks overhead, spread their beds and stretched themselves comfortably in the space under the seats”. (Narayan, 1958, p 162)

Technique of describing the scene in a congested compartment of a train and lack of politeness in the behavior of people puts reader in drollery. The psychological perceptions of humor in R.K. Narayan’s work can be supported by the article published in The Hindu News paper. Book Talk: Gentle but ironical Alexander, Mc Call Smith – ‘It’s what I like to do’. In India for the Jaipur Literary festival Alexander Mc Call Smith tells Mita Kapur about his writing books, Africa and favorite writers.

Witticisms are a way of life and talking to Alexander Mc. Call Smith is to know that he’s instinctively observing people around him with a gently ironical sense of humour. When asked about his wit, irony and a chuckle a sentence kind of humour he reflects, one has to

have a balance, must notice the tragic bleak side of it to be able to see the humor as well. His approach is fairly dry, not unkind, looking at a humorous situation naturally.

On influences that had left a mark on him, he reflects “R.K. Narayan is a wonderful writer; I don’t think I would have written the Ladies Detective Agency series, had I not read him. His books have a lovely sense of people doing things even when life is not treating them. Narayan has a rootedness. His impression is that readers like to have a sense of the local of the landscape they are reading about. He also wishes that more people would read him in Western Europe. According to Mc Call Smith R.K. Narayan should have received a Nobel Prize for his literary work.

There is lot of similarity in writings of Mc call smith and R.K. Narayan for they have the innate quality of invoking humor in all types of situations. (The Guide, 1958, p 13) “My father left me with the remark, I have better things to do of a morning than make a genius out of a clay –head”. Raju’s father would make him study in the early morning. But he was very slow in doing sums. His father would rather give up with a remark that he has better things to do than making a genius out of clay –head.

“Thin as a broom stick, but talks like a giant thought Raju”. (Narayan, 1958, p.97, 161) Velan’s brother meets Raju and tells him about the fights going on between different groups in the village. Raju thought that he is thin as broom stick with giant voice. Comedy is shown in the comparison of a man to that of a broomstick. “When he turned away from me in utter wrath, the profound solemnity of this puny man with his ledger clutched under his arm and his multicolored turban struck me as so absurd that I convulsed with laughter. The character sketched by Narayan of a puny man with a colored turban makes Raju laugh heartily.

Narayan gives his opinion on laughter by relating it to his characters in the novel, the imagination or the comparison of a dancer to that of a parrot or a monkey creates laughter. He makes in depth study of the effect of laughter in human beings. Laughter is contagious and it swallows up all the sorrows. It reduces stress. He experiments with his characters at various levels to produce laughter. (Narayan, 1958, p 203)

In the novel ‘The Man Eater of Malgudi,’ 1961, p 45 Vasu forces Nataraj to accompany him in his jeep towards Mempi forest. He leaves him near village road and disappears into the jungle. Nataraj sat on a wooden plank and started talking to the tea shop man. He had to accompany Vasu without taking his purse. He was in an awkward situation without carrying any money. He was feeling hungry and was worried about ticket less travelling.

“Because you’ll not hesitate to make a meal of any fool who has the ill luck to go with you”. I remarked mentally. (Narayan, 1961, p 41) Nataraj had very bad experience talking to Vasu, so he thought that only an unlucky person can go with him. Nothing good will happen to the person who accompanied Vasu a taxidermist. He is always dominating others.

In the afternoon the road was deserted. A donkey was chewing old newspaper. The scene creates humour cows and bulls were sleeping on the road and few children were walking along the edge of the road gazing with fascination into the gutter. Children are fascinated by strange things. Imagination of Narayan in narrating the scene of a sleepy afternoon tickles fun in the reader. (Narayan, 1961, p 110, 123) ‘The tailor lost his head and said’ has he no other business than bothering me for those miserable jackets of his wife? This is the fifth time he has visited me. “Throw her pieces out fling his pieces in his face”. The tailor gets very angry at the customer visiting him repeatedly. He tells the boy to throw the pieces and fling on his face. The technique used by Narayan about angry emotion of tailor is hilarious.

“The ailing elephant just picked up the bamboo tray raised it and set it flying across the field”. (Narayan, 1961, p 126) When the temple elephant was ailing, people wanted to feed it, but instead it flung the tray across the field. The strength of elephant is used as technique to create humour. (The Vendor of Sweets, 1967, p21) “Jagan hated when his wife Ambika would tie a towel around her head to relieve herself from severe headache. He could not bear the ghoulish look of his wife when she was suffering from migraine.

When Jagan was counting his money he heard the sound of front door and sat still feeling like a burglar in his own house. Jagan’s money was being stolen by Mali. When he came to know about it, he was curious, to what extent his money was lost. (Narayan, 1967, p. 50, 110-111) Narayan pokes fun at the ironies of small incidents that occur in our daily life. Jagan wondered how a white bearded man makes black dye for hair to his customers, but he himself would not apply on his beard.

Fear of losing life when Jagan accompanies the bearded man into the deep jungle evokes jocularity. Imagination of unknown danger makes reader enjoy the fun of the technique used by Narayan. (The Painter of signs, 1977, p 24-25, 42) The description of a man with long pointed moustache shows the creativity of Narayan in putting forth humour in his novels. Narayan relates his characters with day to day things. Raman wants to bring change in the education and political system by molding the minds of public. He puts ironically to evolve laughter. Funny episode is depicted in the character of Raman when he was trying dark glasses, he saw everything was dark and the shop man was looking funny with thick lips and square nose.

In the novel, A Tiger for Malgudi (1986, p 51, 118) Narayan describes the Ape tries to console the tiger in the cage, that as long as they are in the circus they have to listen to the demands of the boss with the hope that one day the boss will be running and he would be under command of animals. Jaggu the giant was supposed to act in the scene as if he is attacking the tiger, but, he is very scared looking at the ferocious tiger & dashes into the tiger’s cage. The techniques used by Narayan make reader to laugh out loudly. The tiger did not mean to harm anybody but the people started running to save their lives. Two policemen left the thief in cuffs and ran away. The Tonga man left the passengers in the Tonga and ran for his life. The tailor hid himself in the cupboard to avoid being attacked by the tiger. When

the tiger entered the school children started running here and there in panic. The students were happy to note that there was no school but at the same time they were scared of the tiger. Few students left the school and few locked themselves in the classroom.

Narayan brings out the element of humour by creating a chaotic situation when the school children react on seeing a tiger. There was a lot of confusion in the school premises and even the teachers were helpless in handling the situation. The teachers bolted the door from outside because the tiger has entered the office room; the head master climbs the table to reach the attic. They started discussing about how to get rid of the tiger. But they do not come to any conclusion. They were planning to call the hunter and shoot the tiger. The master of the tiger had a solution to the problem, but he was turned away by the teachers. The story humorously reflects inability of the intellectuals to take the right decision at a critical moment, while the children get excited at the sight of the wild tiger.

Narayan's novel "The Talkative Man", (1986, p19) "Talkative man remarked from his seat that an auto rickshaw ride was heating to the blood and also disjointed the bones." Talkative man refers to his fat neighbor Ramu as a sort of vegetation or a geological specimen because of his immobility. He was jealous of the talkative man going in an auto every day, so he remarks that all his bones may get disjointed.

In Narayan's, 'The World of Nagaraj', (1990, pp. 33 –37) Nagaraj's character is more humorous in 'The World of Nagaraj'. The deep feeling of character about the smell of cattle shed strengthens the sense of the ludicrous. The technique of flattery of Tim by comparing him to a eucalyptus tree produces humour.

' In Grandmother's Tale', (1992, p 2-5, 28), Narayan creates a Grandmother who gives a sum to solve, but Narayan thinks logically of obtaining mangoes directly from a tree rather than paying for it. He is not interested in solving the problems. Grandmother would not allow Narayan to go to sleep until he completed his work, she would sprinkle cold water on his face whenever he fell asleep. Jocularly of the situation is incredible. When Viswa's parents came to know about his missing news, they started quarrelling among themselves. Father had slapped Viswa for misbehaving with his teacher by throwing cow dung on him.

Narayan in his essay 'Next Sunday' (1956, p 30) stresses the need for silence where as in India people are always eager to talk. Public speaking is forming a habit like coffee or tobacco. There are more speakers than listeners. A public speaker would never say 'no' to any invitation to speak on any occasion. He is more excited to hear his own voice. He readily receives the invitation to speak even though for a few minutes. Author remembers a meeting where a lecturer started reading his written speech. He read through a sheet, removed it and put it behind and continued, but the speech would not come to an end. Later on it was discovered that the lecturer's secretary had failed to number the sheets or pin them together. Narayan presents hilariously how a speaker is eager to give speech without the knowledge of matter written in the speech.

'Reluctant Guru' (1974, p5) is a collection of essays written by R.K. Narayan. Essays are witty and hilarious. The Reluctant Guru is none other than the celebrated author Narayan

who himself was exposed to the funny naiveté of American campus crowds. Narayan visits Mid Western University on an invitation to become a ‘visiting professor’. He had no idea as to what it meant. He thought that a visiting professor just visits and professes. He was new to academic matters and feared making a fool of himself on the campus. Narayan was pleased to find his book in many hands but at the same time he felt uneasy thinking that if they cross – examined him he would be lost as they all knew the details of his story.

In the essay ‘The Newspaper habit’ Narayan says that reading morning newspaper has become a habit. Everyone has his own taste, like a few people like to read headlines, while others want to go into the details. He says that advertisement pages area are a source of great delight and amusement. After sometime the daily newspaper is seen in bits in various corners of house. The boy always detaches the sports page and ladies tear out any portion of paper that interests them, it may be anything from beauty tips or about pudding. When a newspaper is borrowed and never returned, one has to content himself with the previous day’s paper. (Narayan, 1974, p 50, 52) “A Writer’s Nightmare” is a collection of Narayan’s personal essays, all topics are hilarious. In the Essay Junk: Narayan says that he had been searching more and more for something rather than writing or reading. It would be a life saving tax-receipt diary or key bunch. If not found, he gets frustrated and starts cursing oneself for accumulation of Junk.

In “God, Demons and others” (1987) Reviews: The modern retelling of ancient tales generally makes for a spurious kind of literature. It’s no good unless the stories can be made first hand again, dragged up out of the artist’s own invention again, and that has not often happened here. These are far and away the best retellings of Indian tales that I’ve read and I’ve read some hundreds.-Ted Hughes, the New York Review of books. Mahisha’s adviser comments on Devi with eighteen arms to frighten the asuras. He wants to prove that they are not puppets to get frightened by the physical form of Devi. (p57)

Trisanku wanted to reach heaven with the help of Viswamitra but Indra sends him back to earth. He is in an upside down position with feet up and head down. Viswamitra sends him again to heaven saying that he should first land with feet on heaven and stand firmly on his feet. Mythological characters are very unique in their own way. All magical things happen with them. Sometimes they create humour in their unique roles.

(Narayan, 1987, p. 77,154) Duryodhana on his visit to Pandava’s palace committed several grotesque faux pas stepping over a courtyard made with shining marble, he tucked up the hem of his robe, mistaking it for a pool of water his hosts laughed at his action. He passed through a hall with painting on the walls and attempted to pluck a fruit painted on a cornice piece. The Pandavas roared with laughter, the loudest peal emanating from Draupadi, Duryodhan got very angry, withdrew from the scene, his nerves all a quiver.

In “The Ramayana” (1987, p. 42, 71) All the people were going to attend the marriage of Rama with Sita. The noise of the drums, trumpets made people communicate by only signs; comedy emerges at the behavior of dumb people. Comic arises at the scene of

bullocks running here and there to create chaos among the people. When Bharatha comes to know the reality of his cruel mother he gets very angry and scolds her for her cunning and deviousness to trap the king into a promise to be fulfilled according to her desires.

When Soorpanaka described Sita from head to toe in minute detail; Ravana fell madly in love with her and became restless and unhappy. He lay tossing and turning on his bed. He gets angry at nature and says ‘Banish all seasons’. There was a complete standstill in time against the nature. (Narayan, 1987, p 91, 101) Ravana was full of pride and ego. He captures Sita and wants to marry her. Ravana cries out that no human being has ever fought with asura. He compares Rama to a rabbit hoping to destroy an elephant herd.

Hanuman goes in search of Sita to Lanka. He was taken in to custody and to make fun of him, his tail was lit with fire. Hanuman burnt the whole of Lanka. Ravana rebuilds it. The commander in chief to Ravana rebukes him saying that Lanka got destructed by a monkey and next it would be a swarm of mosquitoes. Humour reflects itself in the situation. (Narayan, 1987, p 141)

In “Waiting for the Mahatma” (1967, p 20-29) ‘She examined the canvas and said ‘Its’ mouse for me. This is some kind of leather, probably cow-hide, and I can’t pollute myself by sitting on it’. Sri Ram bought a chair for his grandmother, but she was suspicious about the leather used for making the chair. She did not want to pollute herself by sitting on cow’s hide which is against Brahmin custom. “All women are your sisters and mother. Never look at them with thoughts of lust. Walk with your head down, looking at the ground during the day and with your eyes up looking at the stars at night”. Gandhiji suggested.

Sri Ram was attending one of the gatherings of Gandhiji. He sat near the enclosure where women were assembled to stare at them. But he could recollect Gandhiji’s suggestion of not looking at women with lust, instead men can walk with head down during day time and with head up during night. The imagination of the author to produce a situation of humour is excellent.

“They would not kill him for it is any way killing! He was amused at the word. No word could be more incongruous in the vicinity of one who would not hurt even the British.”(Narayan, 1967, p 34) Sri Ram was very terrified to go along with the group in the gathering of Mahatma. He was imagining all kinds of silly things happening to him. He actually wanted to meet Bharati who worked for Gandhiji.

Humor and Laughter may influence health: From a psychological perspective, humor involves cognitive emotional, behavioral psycho-physiological and social aspects. The term humor can refer to a stimulus, which is intended to produce a humorous response, a mental process (perception of amusing incongruities) or a response (laughter, exhilaration). Laughter is the most common expression of humorous experience. Humor and laughter are also typically associated with a pleasant emotional state. For the purpose of these reviews, humor is defined as a stimulus that helps people laugh and feel happy.

Laughter is a psycho-physiological response to humor that involves both characteristic physiological reactions and positive psychological shifts. Sense of humor is a psychological trait that varies considerably and allows persons to respond to different types of humorous stimuli. It is necessary to differentiate between these variables as some analysis of humor, use a humor stimulus (video) to determine the effect of 'humor' on an outcome, while others look specifically at the effects of laughter on these outcomes.

Using humor to confront whatever the perceived threat is will ease tension and provide you with the ability to see things from a new perspective. With every event or situation psychologically linked, we know it's not the event that causes the stress; it's how we perceive it. So if you can use humor to change the way you perceive a situation, you're going to have a psychological benefit from it.

Subtle, caring humor has proven effective in treating patients in the field of psychotherapy. From this perspective, humor provides the very tools needed to work through the emotions and problems that cause fossilized perceptions that prevent real learning from occurring.

In conclusion, in all the above situations in R. K. Narayan's works, the effect of humor on the minds of the reader and the benefits of laughter has been clearly brought out.

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