

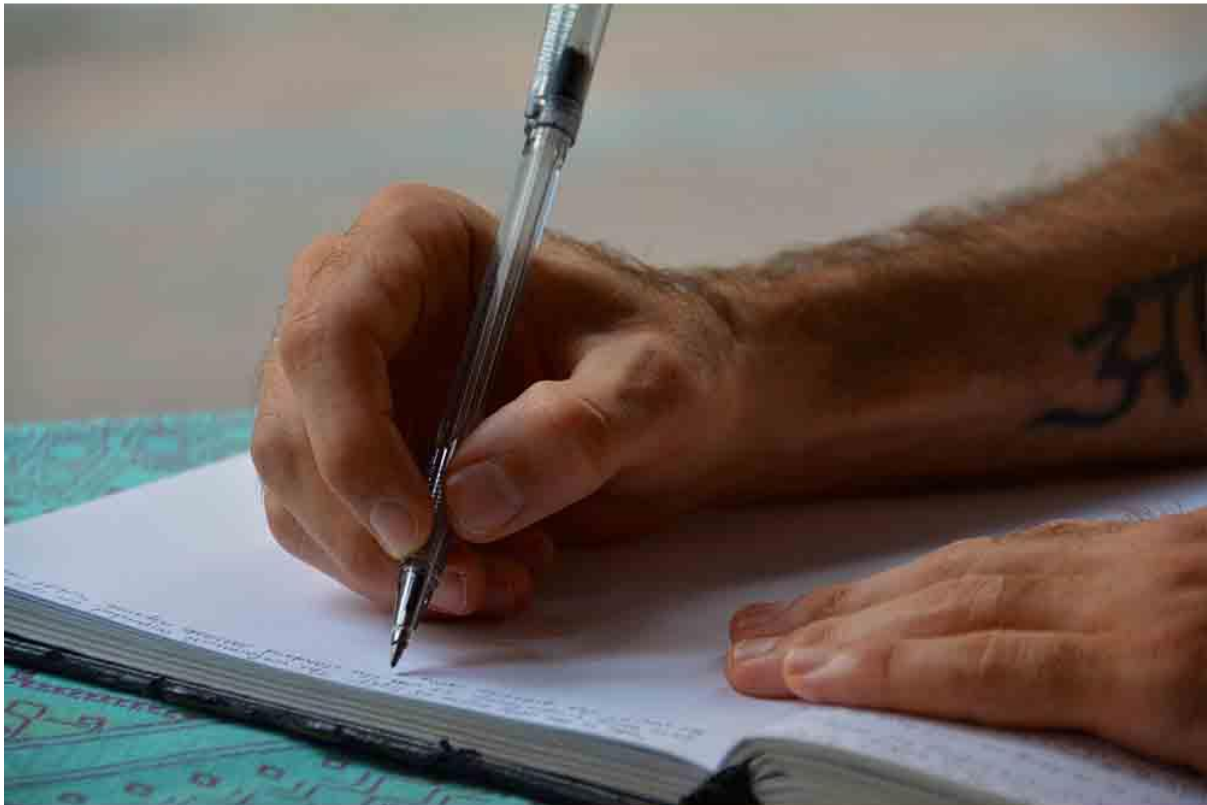
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019

www.ijellh.com

C. Gopal Reddy

Research Scholar, external

Department of English

Annamalai University

Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu

gopalreddycheruvu@gmail.com

Dr. R. Vijaya

Assistant Professor of English

Annamalai University

Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu

Portrayal of Indian Panorama in R.K. Narayan's Short Stories

Abstract

R.K.Narayan is a famous Indian writer. This paper presents R.K.Narayan as a short story writer. He highlights many humorous superstitious elements in his books. This article analyses three of his short stories to substantiate him as an unparalleled short story writer: "An Astrologer's Day," "A Snake in the Grass," and "Fruition at Forty." In these short stories, R.K.Narayan demarcates the role of human relations. Particularly he focuses on money, love, and beauty and shows how these external and internal things affect our lives. He is really a master story teller, and he even presents a serious subject in a humorous and light-hearted way. However, in these stories there is an underlying sadness, which the readers can easily understand. He is successful both as a novelist and short story writer. The readers can

find a variety of fine elements such as anger, humour, sadness etc, in his stories, which play vital role in the process of human relations.

Key words: humour, superstition, sadness, consequences

“An Astrologer’s Day” is one of the most interesting short stories of R.K.Narayan. An astrologer comes from a village to a town and starts his business by sitting under a tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the town hall park. He with sacred ash on his forehead and a yellow turban round his head attracts many people towards him. The place he selects for his job is also a busy place with people coming and going, henceforth he gets a good number of clients. People from all walks of life come and go through this particular part of the town.

The astrologer develops the art of forecasting and consoling the people by carefully studying them. For this, he adopts the methods of allowing his clients to speak first. When they speak much about themselves he carefully guesses about the incidents in their life and he also finds out their strong and weak points, based on this, he will tell them many things and they will be pleased. He charges them three paise each.

The astrologer’s forefathers being agriculturists, he has to stay in his own village and till his land, marry there, and live there until his death. But he leaves his village suddenly due to his quarrel with a person of his village and his attempt at murdering him by stabbing him and throwing him into a well. Thinking that the man is dead, the astrologer runs away from his village and comes to the town, marries a woman and settles in the town by adopting the profession of an astrologer.

One day at twilight, when the astrologer is about to windup his business, a client challenges him to convince him by foretelling whether he will achieve his goal or not. The astrologer does not like this challenge and tries to go away. But the client does not allow him

and insists on taking up the challenge for an anna. When some light shines, the astrologer recognizes that the client is no other than the person whom he has once stabbed. The astrologer rewinds the incidents exactly as they happened in his serious tone and also advises him not to go to the south as there is a lurking danger to his life. The fully convinced and surprised client offers him a handful of coins and vanishes in the dark.

It is already late for the astrologer and he reaches his house in the midnight. His wife is angry and calls for an explanation. The astrologer relates how he has escaped from an impending danger. Thus, R.K.Narayan skillfully narrates this story. It is interesting as well as entertaining. This story exposes the true colour of the astrologers. R.K.Narayan clearly shows that the astrologer himself does not even know what happens to him in the next minute. But the astrologer tries to predict the future of his clients. He pretends to be a knower of stars, their movements and their effects on the life of his clients. R.K.Narayan shows in this story that all this is false. R.K. Narayan proves, the astrologer, but for his insight into human psychology, could not have survived.

R.K. Narayan describes the astrologer and his location with photographic effect. This is the common scene in almost all towns of Indian Sub-Continent. People are superstitious. They believe in all kinds of astrologers. R.K. Narayan gives a message to the readers that even an astrologer does not know his own future and how he can tell the future of other people.

R.K. Narayan also exposes the fact that, generally people who cannot do hard work will resort to such professions like sooth-saying and forecasting plying upon human weakness.

One can find the typical Indian sensibility which R.K. Narayan's writings bring very beautifully:

To crown the effect he wound a saffron- coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways: a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road morning till night. (*Malgudi Days* 3)

We can find the wisdom and the wit of R.K. Narayan in his selection of the title for this story. Since the story ends with the astrologer getting more fee i.e., twelve annas and on the very same day the astrologer's antecedents come before the reader, it is a wise selection of the title "An Astrologer's Day."

Next to the astrologer a vendor of fried groundnut calls people to purchase the groundnut. Here, R.K.Narayan gives a realistic picture of a seller of groundnuts. For every other day the seller of groundnut gives a fancy name of his groundnuts. For example one day he calls them "Bombay Ice Cream" and on the next day "Delhi Almond" and on the third day "Raja's Delicacy." Such descriptions enable his readers to recapitulate the scene of Indian markets in small villages and towns. It is guessed from the story that the astrologer's once victim came as a client in the darkness of the night, and it is due to the astrologer's disguise that he could not recognize his lifelong and long searching enemy. The irony is, he entreats his foe to forecast his future:

"A knife has passed through you once?" Said the astrologer. "Good fellow!" He bared his chest to show the scar. "What else?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead."... When shall I get at him?" he asked, clenching his fist. "In the next world" answered the astrologer. He died four months ago in a far – off town. You will never see any more of him."

These dialogues show R.K.Narayan's skills in narrating an interesting event. He gives sufficient chance for the reader to guess and find out the real instance i.e., what should have happened? – for this, the reader will have to find the answer. The astrologer further uses this opportunity to his great advantage and directs him not to set his foot in that direction ever in his life.

“A Snake in the Grass” is another interesting short story in which a cyclist stops near a bungalow and informs the inmates that a big cobra has gone into their compound. The inmates wake up their sleeping servant Dasa, and ask him to make a search for the snake. Neighbours gather there and blame Dasa for his laziness. The grass in the land is cut, and they turn every stone but they could not trace the snake. In the evening Dasa brings a pot. The pot is sealed with a stone and Dasa says that he has sealed the snake in the pot with a slab and he will take this to the snake charmer. The family members appreciate for his prudent action.

But after five minutes, the youngest son cries that the snake is in a hole in the compound wall. The snake comes out and glides towards the gate. Then it crawls under the gate and disappears along a drain. The family members are puzzled and exclaim whether there are two snakes. The college boy says that it would have been better, had he taken risk and seen the pot of Dasa.

In this story, R.K. Narayan cleverly leaves to the choice of his readers the question, “whether the pot contains a snake or just it is a clever trick played by the servant Dasa”?

There is a possibility to think that there might have been two snakes:

Which was caught by Dasa in the pot.

Which was seen by the young son.

Anyhow, the answer to this question is left to the wisdom of the readers. Some readers may think there are two snakes, while some others may think that the servant Dasa has cheated to show that he is a, “prudent servant.”

In the story, R.K.Narayan beautifully brings out the fact that when something goes wrong the society generally blames the weaker or the lower cadre, persons. In this story when the neighbours come to know that a snake has entered the compound of the bungalow, begin to blame the poor servant Dasa that he is a lazy person. Of course some of them co-operate with Dasa in searching for this snake. Thus, R.K. Narayan shows that in a society some persons will rise to the occasion and help the needy people.

In this story, R.K.Narayan exposes the superstitions of the South Indians, especially the Tamilians. The following incidents in this story, clearly indicate this:

An old beggar cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to pester when they were engaged in a snake hunt. On hearing it, the old woman became happy. "You are fortunate. It is god Subramanya who has come to visit you. Don't kill the snake." Mother was in hearty agreement: "you are right. I forget all about the promised Abhishekam. This is a reminder." She gave a coin to the beggar, who promised to send down a snake – charmer as she went. (Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories 94)

In south India many people do not kill the snakes. In this story, the mother confirms the statement of the beggar that Subramanya Swami himself has come to their house. The old beggar also advises not to kill the snake.

When the four sons know that a snake has entered their compound, they wake up sleeping Dasa, the old servant. When the servant is not ready to believe that the snake has entered the compound, the sons warn him that he should find the snake before the evening, otherwise they will dismiss him. Thus, how the rich treat their servants, is clearly exposed by R.K. Narayan. Even for small reasons they dismiss their servant. By reading this statement, some readers may reasonably think that Dasa himself might have played a trick and showed that he had caught the snake in the pot and sealed the pot. This, he might have done to show that he had done his duty.

The beggar sends a snake charmer. The snake charmer asks the family members to show the snake so that he can catch it. They do not show it, in fact they cannot, and then the snake charmer departs. By five in the afternoon, every stone in the garden is turned up, and every grass blade is cut down, so that the tiniest insect coming into the garden should have no cover. Then Dasa appears carrying water pot whose mouth is sealed with a slab of stone. He says, "I have caught him in this. I saw him peeping out of it I saw before he could see me"(95). He explains at length the strategy he has employed to catch and seal up the snake in the pot. They stand at a safe distance and gaze on the pot. Dasa has the glow of a champion on his face: "Don't call me an idler hereafter" (95).

Thus, R.K. Narayan brings his story towards an interesting conclusion. Bringing of a pot with snake is something strange and it also raises curiosity in all the persons who were present there but they fear to come nearer the pot and touch it. Dasa feels, he is victorious and he warns that nobody should call him an idler hereafter. Thus, R.K. Narayan shows in this story the victory of a poor servant. This shows the author's sympathetic attitude towards the poor and the underdog, besides this, the author makes Dasa the hero of the day.

In this way, R.K. Narayan cleverly ends this story, leaving the reader in a state of uncertainty. The question whether there is only one snake or there are two snakes, is left to the guess of the reader.

R.K. Narayan's short story, "Fruition at Forty" is really a masterpiece. Rama Rao works as a section in charge in an office. On the eve of his 40th birthday, he requests his officer to allow him to absent himself on the following day. The officer is surprised to know that Rama Rao has become forty years old. He gives him permission. Rama Rao decides to purchase some gifts to his family members and some provisions and vegetables for a modest party in his house. For this, he goes to market by a bus. He gets down the bus and enters a shop and selects some gift items, and when he is ready to pay the bill he finds that his money-

purse is missing. Then, he sadly returns all his gifts to the shop owner. On his way, he thinks much about his fate. He cleverly decides that he should not remind his family members about his birthday, and he also decides not to tell his wife about the fact that he has lost the money-purse. This is the only gift which he could give to his wife and his purse has gone as a gift to his pick pocket. This is the irony of fate.

When Rama Rao obtains permission to absent himself for his birthday, the officer exclaims, “Honestly I did not think you were forty!”

R.K. Narayan writes about the city of Madras. He shows us how Rama Rao struggles into a bus at Parry’s corner and then how he hangs on to a strap. Then, R.K. Narayan writes how Rama Rao thinks about the origin of human beings: “Good thing we were Monkeys Once” (Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories 167). We can say R.K. Narayan was influenced by Darwin’s theory which says that human beings evolved from monkeys. Many of R.K. Narayan’s contemporaries were also influenced by the Darwin’s Theory. Darwin’s theory gave a rational approach to many writers. R.K. Narayan is also one among such writers.

R.K. Narayan writes about Parry’s Corner and Moore Market of Madras city. He shows us how a city bus in Madras city is overcrowded and how pickpockets take undue advantage of this situation. Rama Rao loses his purse in the overcrowded bus, and as a consequence he has to cancel his birthday celebrations. Pick pockets are social evils. Because of this crime many people are thrown into worst kind of difficulties. Some people may lose money which they have saved for the marriage of their sons or daughters, some may lose money which they want to spend for medical treatment of serious diseases. Likewise, in this story Rama Rao loses his money and he gives up his birthday celebrations. Thus, R.K. Narayan brings the evil consequences of pick pocketing in the cities.

R.K. Narayan very cleverly creates such a scene in his story that Rama Rao goes to a shop and selects gifts for his family members, but when he tries to pay the bill, he finds his money purse missing. With much sorrow he returns the selected gifts and walks out of the shop. This is a very pathetic scene. Every reader sympathizes with Rama Rao and for a moment thinks over the evil consequences of pick pocketing.

Rama Rao thinks much about his fate. For sometime he loses his mental equilibrium. He feels much about his bad luck, and he remembers how his previous birthday was celebrated. Thus, R.K. Narayan correctly shows human behaviour in such situation of bad luck.

R.K. Narayan gives due consideration to people's belief that a man becomes matured at the age of forty: "People said forty was a man's best age. Every one attained maturity of mind and body. A man's habits were fixed, his prejudices and favors were solidified once for all: all human relationships were well defined and would be free from shocks and surprises" (168).

Since centuries, people have been believing that at the age of forty, a man becomes a real man. His habits, prejudices and favors are solidified. R.K. Narayan supports this belief and through this story, he wants to give a message to his reader to review what they have done within these forty years. So through his character in this story, Rama Rao, the author indicates that one should see his progress in these forty years and if he finds any mistakes of commission and omission he should try to set right his affair. About Rama Rao R.K. Narayan writes:

Rama Rao dwelt on these fruitions of forty and was filled with misgivings. What have I achieved at forty? I have lived sixteen years beyond the point marked by the satisfaction as the expectation of life for an Indian. "I have four children, the eldest reads in a college. The wife has all the jewellery she had asked for. I have risen to be the head of my section in the

office.... Yet I live only in a rented house. The marriage of my daughter and the career of my son will have to be tackled by me within five years. Am I good for it? He was filled with consternation at being forty, at the duties that were definitely expected of him because he was supposed to have reached maturity.” (167).

Thus, at the age of forty Rama Rao reviews his life, his achievement, his failures and he also ponders over what he will have to do in future. Thus, besides giving entertainment, this story is also giving a good message to the readers, that is, one should see his/her balance sheet of achievements and failures at the age of forty and then set his/her new goals.

Rama Rao recollects his earlier birthday celebrations. When he was a boy, his father presented him with a glittering lace cap. On his twentieth birthday soon after his B.A., he resolved never to marry and never to take up any employment unless they offered him three hundred rupees for a start. On his thirtieth birthday he was seized with his panic as he realized that he was a father of three. Now having lost his money purse, he is not in a position to celebrate his fortieth birthday:

As he walked back home, his mind still worried about the purse. After all only twenty rupees and an old purse containing receipts, but his wife would get positively distracted if she heard of the loss. Last time when he could not account for five rupees after a shopping expedition she completely broke down. She must on any account be told of the present loss. He would keep her mind free and happy that would be the birthday gift for her keeping away from her theft of the purse just as the purse itself was a gift to an unknown pickpocket. (168).

In the above quotation, R.K. Narayan shows the difficulties of a middle class person. Rama Rao is a middle class person. He also decides not to tell his wife about the theft of his money purse. Such is the plight of a middle class man. Even a small loss can upset a middle class family. Anyhow, by not telling his wife about the theft of his money purse and even about his fortieth birthday, Rama Rao tries to keep his wife’s mind free and happy- and this

in itself would be the birthday gift for her. In another sense, this is also a birthday gift to an unknown pickpocket. In this way R.K. Narayan concludes this story with a philosophical note.

After cancelling his birthday party Rama Rao attends his office and the officer asks him “Your birthday over?” The answer given by Rama Rao is also an interesting one, he replies to his chief “yes, sir,” “over earlier than I expected.” The chief of Rama Rao instead of sympathizing with Rama Rao, he says, “very good, I was hoping you would turn up for at least half a day, a lot of things to do” (169). Thus, R.K. Narayan shows that Rao’s boss is more interested in his work.

R.K. Narayan cleverly concludes this story by clearly bringing out the selfish attitude of the officer. Ofcourse R.K. Narayan does not subscribe to any kind of theories of writing. He says, “I, for one, am prepared to assert that all theories of writing are bogus. Every writer develops his own method or lack of method and story comes into being for some unknown reason and anyhow. The process involved cannot be stated theoretically” (Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories vii).

His opinion is that a person writes stories because of his natural inclination. So, he says that he found material for his stories “in the open air, Market- place, and streets of Mysore.”

R.K. Narayan says that at an early stages of his life he enjoyed a lot of freedom. He attempted to write and went out on long walks along the tanks, parks and avenues and even climbed the hill which looms over his city. He also used to watch the crowd in the market. So, he was able to imagine and write stories. He says:

The very first story I wrote about a one armed beggar who stood in the middle of a narrow street in front of a coffee- house and sailed forth with upheld palm when he spotted young

men emerging from the restaurant in a merry, convivial mood. I wrote my first short story about him under the title “The One – Armed Giant.”(viii).

R.K. Narayan says a story may have its origin in a personal experience or a bit of observation or a conversation overheard.

R.K. Narayan says that the short story is the best medium for utilizing the wealth of the subjects available:

A Novel is different proposition altogether centralized as it is a on a major theme, leaving out, necessarily, a great deal of the available material on the periphery. Short stories, on the other hand, can cover a wider field by presenting concentrated miniatures of human experience in all its opulence. (viii).

In the story, “Fruition at forty” he describes human experience in all its opulence. When Rama Rao struggles in to a bus, he feels much irritated, and remembers the fact that we were monkeys once. In a crowded bus the conductor’s behaviour and other passengers’ irritation are also clearly described. It is also difficult to get down from that crowded bus, so R.K. Narayan writes, “Rama Rao wriggled through and fought his way out when the bus stopped at central station” (Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories 166).

R.K. Narayan is a very good and keen observer of human nature and behavior.

Relevantly in the words of P.S.Sundaram:

Narayan’s books spring from the mud and river of Malgudi.

Without any attempt to project a picture. Narayan takes one.

In novel after novel and in every short story to the men and

women, the little boys and girls who could come from no

where except a particular region of the country. And yet the

value of the books is more than merely sociological. The scene

is Malgudi, but the play is a human. Not merely an Indian

drama. [“Thematic Concerns of R.K.Narayan’s *Malgudi Days*”145]

References

Narayan, R.K. *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1968.

.....*Under The Banyan Tree And Other Stories*. London: Heineman, 1985.

Prof. Sukumar, M.A.K. Ed. "Thematic Concerns of R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*". *Journal of English Studies* Vol.4&5 (2009): Department of English S.V.University College of Humanities, PP 143- 147.