

Humour and anticolonial discourse in the early novels of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract: The paper explores the use of humour as a literary device to protest, criticize and reject the ruling class and its culture in the early novels of R. K. Narayan. He, generally labeled as an apolitical writer, maintains the equilibrium between tacit criticism of the colonial system and the projection of Indian values, thereby building a counter narrative against the British hegemony with his subversive humour. His lighthearted humour is overtly charged and politically loaded with strong anticolonial arguments that open new vistas and presents humour as a literary weapon. R. K. Narayan appears naive and is engaged in the apparent projection of Indianness, but behind the veil of simplicity, his writing emerges as a strong medium of criticism.

Keywords: humour, postcolonialism, anticolonial, culture, character, identity

Humour is commonly approached as an apolitical antidote to seriousness. The question of the seriousness of fun and the funniness of serious have conventionally been perceived as semantic paradoxes, although if we closely parse the content of humour, it relatively often proves to be embedded in social reality, and is often highly politically charged. (Ridanpaa 2014, 711-712)

Humour in its nuanced form transcends genre, time, and geographical territories to mark its presence in literature, be it Dante, John Milton or J. K. Rowling. As humour creates the ambience of pleasure and amuses everyone, literary critics until recently have even believed that a work of art which “evokes innocent laughter lacks intellectual appeal” (Mtumane 2001, 433). This assumption is a constraint to the wider significance of the theory of humour and its applications when there are works like *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), *Tom Jones* (1749) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) of varied implications

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and of high repute. Sigmund Freud promulgated the dimensions of humour with his popular work, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and the credit for unearthing the sociological, therapeutic, and biological value of humour must be given to the thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Soren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan. Literary criticisms, of late has highlighted the hitherto unnoticed implications of humour arising in the popular works of fiction as a postcolonial device to overpower the Other, the marginal and the subaltern.

The paper discusses the early novels of R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), who is generally labeled as a regional writer for his creation of the fictional town Malgudi, which in many ways, is the microcosm of India engulfed with nationalism, Hinduism, ethnocentrism and nativism. The paper articulates that beneath the shadow of pan Indian culture, he maintains the equilibrium between tacit criticism of the colonial system and the projection of Indianness, and thereby successfully builds a counter narrative against the British hegemony. His artistic approach bears close affinity to that of Ridanpaa, where humour is used “both as a rhetoric device and as an outlook, in the process of fixing, organizing, representing and reasoning their personal experiences as well as in identity perceptions” (Rindappa 2014, 712). Narayan’s humour paves a new space for the marginalized and narrates their being different with the ones placed at the center, in the manner pronounced by Muchiri (2015, 769), “humour offers marginalized population an opportunity to voice their discontent and to challenge prejudice”.

The seriousness of the arguments placed in humour is lightened by the laughter that emerges out of it but there is high seriousness missed by many in the works of Narayan. The writer praised thoroughly for his projection of Indian middle class society with Hindu life style and values often softens his anticolonial arguments making it acceptable, subtle and long lasting through humour. Multitudes of critics are of identical opinion on the implications of R. K. Narayan’s work. Majority of them including V. S. Naipaul and Uma Parameswaran are critical pleading the apolitical stand and circular movements in the plot. Ghai mentions, “Narayan’s art is too undeliberate and too much uncritical” (Ghai 1975, 34). Further Aikant comments, “he remains detached from the raging social and political issues and dilemmas of his times and seems committed to his artistic vision alone” (Aikant 2007, 99). H. M. Williams says, “Where Anand is an angry protestor, a

satirist, and a revolutionary author of tragic or mere tragic coolie and untouchable, Narayan is essentially a humourous writer” (Williams 1976, 49).

Narayan uses the English language to suit his own Indian perception and to address new sensibilities, thereby humour emerges as a natural offshoot of his writing. “In his (Narayan) case, unlike that of Desani, Raja Rao, or Rushdie, it is not the language or the art of storytelling that bears the imprint of traditional cultures, but his vision, his attitude to social and personal crises” (Dissanayake 1985, 235). This unique technique has camouflaged and provided a literary veil to some of the serious issues dealt by the author. It is a fact, missed by most of Narayan’s critics, that he projects all dominant social and cultural problems, under the garb of humour and irony which enables him to show the incoherent inconsistencies, weaknesses, evil and goodness of human nature altogether and the oscillation of human consciousness between the two perennial sides (good and evil). Unlike his contemporaries, he never tries to be didactic or moralist in his writings. Analyzing the use of his humour, William Walsh says: “tracts of human experiences are looked at with that kind of humour in which jokes are also a series of moral insights. This explains why R. K. Narayan’s humour is not satirical but ironical always” (Walsh 1973, 47). Narayan’s humour is a direct result of the intellectual analysis of inherent contradictions in human nature. It ensues from the observations of human weakness, follies and foibles where his characters “are a comic blend of virtue and weakness” (Venkatachari 1970, 74) but are always seeking a positive philosophy of life. There is a lack of forceful ridiculing, farce, mockery and sardonicism in his writings but it does not mean that his writings are devoid of critical humour. “Narayan’s novels treat of the subtle realities of the common man, be he a student, a teacher, a financial expert, a painter, a champion of emancipation or a guide” (Ibid, 73) and presents it through wisecracks, loaded with multiple meanings.

Narayan always avoids character assassination, vulgarity or caricature, in order to make his writings joyful experience for his readers. He preferred to rely on indirect and covert projections of acrid and sensitive issues under the garb of subtle humour. Idiosyncrasies of major and minor characters, ironical situations, situational comedies, and unusual circumstances arising due to generation gap, educational and cultural differences are the immediate sources of Narayan’s humour. As Helen Tiffin mentions,

It is not just the experience of other worlds that makes post-colonial literature fundamentally different from that of the European, but the double vision inherent in the use of an alien language to express these worlds, and the concomitant perceptions of the political implications of the act. (Tiffin 1984, 26)

The attempt of anticipatory resistance to colonial rule, thereby addressing national values is witnessed from the very first novel of Narayan, *Swami and Friends* (1935). This novel introduced one aspect of the kind of humour that has made Narayan famous: the humour of the world as seen by little children” (Nazareth 1965, 121). Narayan has attempted colonial resistance through the young protagonist’s reactions, filled with humour. The novel is a “textbook example of how empire time operates in colonial texts as an imposed order that is in tension with local or native time but in a way that does not necessarily anticipate a resistant version of the future” (Barnsley 2014,732). However, the anticolonial remarks remained unnoticed due to dominant innocent humour associated with children’s behavior. This method of critiquing colonial values and cultural hegemony through the young protagonist is followed even in his next novel *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937). The novel has a simple storyline and “Narayan presents his character as comic in the blindness of their egoism; and yet as never so small that one cannot feel sympathy for them” (Nazereth 1965, 125). Narayan’s next novel *The English Teacher* (1945) is replete with humour arising from the major protagonist Krishna’s reaction to the colonial ideas and the effects it has on his personality.

Narayan’s humour appears unique and strange to fiction, therefore charges are often made against him of being frivolous in approach. It hints at his comical yet serious bent of mind that is unique and not found in other fiction. Almost every humorous expression in his work is tinged with seriousness usually unexpected in other works of fiction. His humour in the early novels may appear very light hearted in tone but it brings to light his knack of exploring the innate tendency of man to barge into the arena of oscillation between appearance and reality. This is why Hatfield mentions, “When words are humorously important, it is rather that they reveal something about the speaker than that they are verbally comic” (Hatfield 1979, 103). One can notice the exaggeration in Swami’s speech wherein he describes his fellow student Shankar that brings chuckles on reader’s face.

There was a belief among the section of the boys that if only he started cross-examining the teachers the teachers would be nowhere [...]. He knew all the rivers, mountains and countries in the world. He could repeat History in his sleep; Grammar was a child's play for him. (Narayan 2006a, 7)

The discussion of the principle Mr. Brown and Krishna regarding the significance of spelling in English language in *The English Teacher* is one such similar instance. The principal was very serious and said that it is a blunder even for Mathematics teacher to commit mistake in spelling, upon which Krishna says, "...the English department existed solely for dotting the i's and crossing the t's" (Narayan 2009, 7). Krishna voices angst against colonial rule and appears to be justifiable when he undermines the English language, which he has been teaching simply because it is subjugating his Indianness.

Humour generally has a tendency to stimulate frivolity. Therefore the paper further analyses this claim to contradict by saying that it stimulates frivolity only to intensify the seriousness. Humour works as a catalyst by aggravating the seriousness in R.K Narayan's novels. When the teacher asks Swami about Indian climate in the classroom he says, "It's hot in summer and cold in winter" (Narayan 2006a, 16). However, the same Swami while preparing for the examination is portrayed thinking:

He opened the political map of Europe and sat gazing at it. It puzzled him how people managed to live in such crooked a country as Europe. He wondered what the shape of the people might be who lived in the places where the outline narrowed as in a cape, and how they managed to escape being strangled by the contour of their land. And then another favorite problem began to tease him: how did those map-makers find out what the shape of a country was? How did they find out that Europe was like a camel's head? (Narayan 2006a, 55)

The factual phenomenon underlying humorous expressions brings into account the concern of sociologists in viewing humour objectively. The sociologists often ignore humour and jokes as a part of the social reality. In the guise of objectivity, they seem to ignore the individual and subjective connotations involved in character study. "Humour, like other parts of social structures surrounding us are living experiences, institutionalized or spontaneous historical process, which take different forms in different societies, historical conjectures and cultures" (Mantzaris 1985, 112). Swami's reaction primarily brings smile with

surprise, which actually shadows the anticolonial stand especially in a classroom, when his teacher continuously insults and lampoons Hindu Gods and compares Lord Krishna to Christ:

Did our Jesus go about stealing butter like that arch-scoundrel Krishna ...? He [Swami] got up and asked, if he did not, why was he crucified? ... If he was a God, why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine? (Narayan 2006a, 4)

The paper portrays humour in the light of contemporary approach where love, marriage and relationships are treated differently under the changing trends of modernization. The concept of love marriage abounds in anticolonial sentiments. In the similar manner, Narayan's novels seem to mock the notion of humour preserved by time honoured ideas. Chandran's blind love for Malathi in *The Bachelor of Arts* is portrayed in a manner that makes him immature and childish. Later Chandran, who left his home and became ascetic, says, "Love is only a brain affection; it led me to beg and cheat; to desert my parents; it is responsible for my mother's extra wrinkles and grey hairs, for my father's neglect of the garden" (Narayan 2006b, 124). It is Narayan's way to resist colonial influence of love marriage and a way to celebrate Indianness. The speech could be considered as a criticism of British Empire as Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "The fulfillment of oneself, however desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideas of western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition" (Mukherjee 2016, 38). Here, the indignation against colonial values is profound but Narayan puts forth comedy and humour instead of suggesting a serious debate. It provides opportunity to his readers to smile at heart and laugh while reading.

Sometimes there is a radical criticism of Europe and the colonial system in the writings of Narayan but the charge is under toned through irony, which seems to be a conflict between culture and humour. "Narayan presents things so factually, bluntly and simply that it is only his irony that saves his writing from being pedestrian. The irony is like a torch illuminating the simplicity, offering, at the same time, hints of other views in the shadows" (Deshpande 2007, 70). One such example is the incident of the protagonist's and his friend's meeting with Gouri Shankar, a freedom fighter in *Swami and Friends*. After listening to the claim of a freedom fighter where he says, "let every Indian spit on England, and the quantity of saliva will be enough to drown England ...", Swaminathan says to Mani, his friend, "Then

why not do it? It is easy” (Narayan 2006a, 95). This is further sharpened when Narayan writes in *The Bachelor of Arts*, “All Europeans are like this. They will take their thousand or more a month, but won’t do the slightest service to Indians with a sincere heart” (Narayan 2006b, 5). Krishna also shows his overt reaction towards the colonial education system in India. He says,

What about our own roots? I thought over it deeply and felt puzzled. I added: I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administrative offices. (Narayan 2009, 178-179)

Soon after, he immediately outpours his indignation; “this education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp follower of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage” (Ibid, 178). He is not satisfied with his job as an English teacher. He ponders and reflects;

I did not do it out of love for them or for Shakespeare but only out of love for myself. If they paid me the same one hundred rupees for stringing beads together or tearing up paper bits every day for a few hours, I would perhaps be doing it with equal fervour. (Ibid, 12)

Subsequently Krishna articulates his disillusion with the college education tendering his resignation from the college. His resignation letter is an acrid reaction to the language policy advocated by Maculay’s Minute of 1835. He thinks of attacking the British education in his letter:

In it I was going to attack a whole century of false education. I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan meter and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. (Narayan 2009, 178)

Swami and Friends attacks the colonial system and Swami is seen participating in anticolonial drives and protests, which led him to the rustication from the school. It is “through refusal, laziness and distraction, the child hero is resistant to the conventional narrative of colonial development in India” (Barnsley 2014, 736). He also decides to burn his British cap and “boycott English goods, especially

Lancashire and Manchester cloth, as the owners of those mills had cut off the thumbs of the weavers of Dacca muslin for which India was famous at one time” (Narayan 2006a, 95-96).

Consequently, humour acts as a strategy that garbs the author’s serious criticism of colonial power and hints towards the hybrid consciousness of his characters. The serious criticism of the Empire through the mouthpiece of the young individual is sharply brought up in *The Bachelor of Arts* when Veeraswami questions, “What have we to learn from the England? What have we to learn from the English?” (Narayan 2006b, 61) This is why Srinath has rightly said; “A Writer like Narayan does a service to criticism as well in freeing of its jargon, which is a tribute to the ‘naivete’ of his art” (Srinath 1981, 419). He openly displays humour but at the core, he is questioning the colonial power. Swami knew that Rajam’s father was a government servant, and his family was pro-British. He was aware that for Rajam, nationalistic activities are dirty politics. “Thus Rajam represents Western culture for Swami, and there is a complete break in the friendship towards the end of the novel that is symbolic of the artist’s break with the alien culture” (Sunitha 1987, 194).

Narayan also uses abundant situational verbal humour arousing persiflage among the readers. One such work where readers read to laugh and laugh to read is *The Bachelor of Arts* that begins with the verbal humour itself. Chandran enters the college and the union secretary says, “You are just the person I was looking for. You remember your old promise? ... You promised that I could count you for a debate anytime I was hard pressed for a speaker” (Narayan 2006b, 1) and requests him to be the prime mover in the debate scheduled at next evening and more interestingly the topic of the debate was “the historians should be slaughtered first”. Chandran says, “I am a history student... My professor will eat me up” (Ibid). Narayan was aware of the need of Indian version of history and expresses an acute need of resisting the British version of Indian history, which is apparent in Ragavachar’s speech in the Union debate. He says,

Great controversial fires were raging over very vital matters in Indian history. And what did they find around them? ...If he were asked what the country needed most urgently, he would not say Self-Government or Economic Independence, but a clarified, purified Indian History. (Narayan 2006b, 36-37)

Here, Ragavachar represents that class of Indians who recognizes the importance of a purified national history in the struggle for independence. In the same debate the principal of the college, Mr. Brown, who otherwise keeps a healthy relationship with his colleagues and students and appears to be a benevolent man, says,

Like art, history must be studied for its own sake; and so, if you are to have an abiding interest in it, take it up after you leave the university. For outside the university you may read your history in any order ...and nobody will measure how many facts you have rammed into your poor head. Facts are, after all, a secondary matter in real history. (Ibid, 38)

Under the veneer of light and subtle humour the author attempts to highlight the fact that people like Mr. Brown is supporting the colonial cause by not advocating the systematic study of history and thus corrupting the young minds. It would be better to mention Fanon's *Black Skin and White Masks* (1952) to elaborate what Narayan exactly attempts with his characters, where Fanon demands alternative history and says that he cannot be the History's prisoner, instead he wants to start the cycle of his freedom.

R. K. Narayan experimented with all the techniques of humour and his works are replete with all kinds of humour. "Humour and laughter are essential for the mechanics of social life" (Mantzaris 1985, 113) and this is why Narayan used humour to amend the social rules and to correct the wrongs imposed to the society. The assumptions of Goldstein seem to suit the purpose of Narayan; "more specifically the function of humour is to initiate and facilitate communication and development of social relationships. Through humour, a consensus is achieved and social distance is reduced ...Humour serves as a symbol of social approval promoting solidarity" (Goldstein 1972, 117).

Narayan was conscious that he was neither a historian nor his writings are history books. Like all literary genius, he wanted to make his writings time transcendent. He used humour as icebreaker between colonial masters and their subjects. At great extent, his humour performs the balancing act between the simple appearance and complex reality of his themes. His pen has different colours to paint his characters, among these colours, the predominant is that of humour under which the intense shades of opposition and condemnation to colonial power is disguised. His contribution and commitment to Indian literature is rightly summed by Deshpande (2007, 71): "When

we look at Narayan's life and works today, we have to admit he was a phenomenon".

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