The Ironic Mode of R. K. Narayan

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Abstract

This paper deals with R. K. Narayan’s vision of life which is essentially ironic. He is keenly aware of the fundamental, irremediable incongruities which life and the world are constantly confronting us with. He is also alive to the fact that there is no possibility at all of reconciling the opposites which every facet of his experience brings to his knowledge. He, therefore, accepts the reality as it presents itself before him. This realization has imparted to him an ambivalent attitude which enables him to form a balanced view of human life and situations.

To Narayan, irony is the mode of perception which can enable him to achieve a balanced, all-round view of human life and the world. In his novel, Mr. Sampath, he comments, if only one could get a comprehensive view of all humanity one would get a correct view of the world (R. K. Narayan, P. 63)\(^1\). Since the ironic mode calls for the spirit of acceptance, Narayan accepts the reality ungrudgingly. He sees no point in attempting to criticize or correct things. As he remarks in Mr. Sampath it is ‘a futile and presumptuous occupation to ….criticize and attempt to set things right(R. K. Narayan, P. 63)\(^2\). He, therefore, tries his best to steer clear of the tendencies, so commonly found in most of the writers of our time, tendencies of condemning the anomalies and absurdities that he finds in every walk of life considering them past cure and of the absolutely futile pretension to set them right. His is the typical ironic attitude of serene acceptance. William Walsh has rightly observed: ‘Accepting, indeed, is the word which best defines… Narayan’s attitude generally in the face of his experience’(William Walsh, p. 134).\(^3\)

The world which Narayan depicts in his novels is paradoxical in its essence. In this world appearance and reality, free will and determinism, individual and society, virtue and vice, reason and passion, beauty and ugliness, hope and despair, tears and smiles, are inseparably interwoven.

An ironist by temperament and sustained self-restrain and disciplin, Narayan carefully excludes from his novels all such aspects of his experience as well not lend themselves easily to his ironic mode of treatment. His art, like that of all truly great ironists, is based on the process of selection and rejection. This is also the case with all artists worth their salt. No artist presents us a picture of the reality in its entirety. ‘The artist must omit much and suppress more’ (Miriam Allott, p. 233)\(^4\) said R. L. Stevenson. It is futile to complain that the world he presents in his novels is narrow.

Narayan possesses all the qualities which are needed for ironic treatment of his experience. He is gifted with objectivity, distance, detachment, dispassion and discipline. In an article on ‘The Fiction Writer in India’ which he wrote long ago for a special issue of Atlantic Monthly, he had described ‘detached observation’ as one of the basic ingredients which constitute ‘the stuff of fiction’ and deplored the trend towards political subjects with Indian novelists showed at that time (K. R. S. Lyengar, p. 281)\(^5\). Without entering into the controversy whether the novelist should deal with political subjects or not, we should like to emphasize on the fact that Narayan laid on mental states like objectivity and detachment, so essential for the ironist, and his rigid adherence to them even during those years when the entire country India, was plunged in the struggle for freedom. His rigorous self-restraint and discipline will be obvious if we recall those years of political agitation and upheaval in India when thousands of men and women gave up their usual vocations to join the freedom movement. It is in the light of the freedom movement and the far reaching impact which it had left on the vast majority of Indians that we can fully appreciate Narayan’s extraordinary dedication to his craft which has earned him the tribute of being the only writer of our time who is thoroughly ‘immersed in his material’ (John Updike, Span, April, 1975).\(^6\)
Narayan’s ironic vision of life has endowed him with considerable mastery of irony in its diverse forms. The passage in *The Guide*, which describes the star-lawyer in an ever interesting and memorable manner offers us superb instances of ‘irony of simple incongruity’ which lies in juxtaposing incongruous or incompatible details (D. C. Muecke, p. 6)\(^9\). The veteran lawyer described herein had ‘saved many a neck from the nose’, ‘absolved many a public swindler’ and could ‘prove a whole gang of lawless hooligans to be innocent victims of police conspiracy’. Narayan here juxtaposes incongruous and incompatible details in a very sly and delicate manner without any direct comment—‘absolved’ and ‘swindler’, ‘gang of lawless hooligans’ and ‘innocent victims of police conspiracy’ (R. K. Naraan, p. 199)\(^8\). The delicate but sure handling of irony of simple incongruities in the examples cited above reminds the readers of Pope’s masterly handling of this ironic device in his mock-epic poem *The Rape of the Lock*: ‘Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Bullet-doux’. While Pope’s use of this device is satiric in its intention, Narayan’s is not. It may be argued, as Prof. Narasimhaiah has done, that Narayan’s use of irony is also pregnant with satiric insinuations; it also cunningly evinces his ‘contempt for a class which has more often than not flourished on damned lies and dishonest as well as dishonourable means’ (C. D. Narasimhaiah, p. 73)\(^7\). We, however, are inclined to the view that the examples of irony as juxtaposition in Narayan’s picture of the star lawyer is completely innocuous and has no satiric intent; it merely reveals Narayan’s good-humoured recognition of the fundamental and irremediable contradiction between intention and realization—the intention with which the institutions of police and law have been created and the results that have been fetched by them.

In novel after novel Narayan has employed the irony of situation and character with remarkable success. The following excerpt from *The Guide* is one of the finest instance of irony of situation that we find in his fictional output:

‘Do you know, sometimes these yogis can travel to the Himalayas by a thought?’ remarks one of the villagers finding him absent from his usual seat. ‘I don’t think he is that kind of yogi,’ said another. ‘Who can say? Appearances are sometimes misleading’, said someone (C. D. Narasimhaiah, p. 73)\(^9\).

In order to appreciate the masterly handling of irony of situation in the passage quoted above, we need to be familiar with the context in which it occurs. Raju, who has been mistaken for a saint by the simple and credulous villagers, is hiding behind the shrine, contemplating some means of escape from their villages. For, he is no longer able to pull on with the fast that the villagers have thrust upon him, because they thought him to be saint. Just when he is thinking out a plan to steal away from their village, they chance to arrive at the temple in a large crowd to have a darshan of their Swami. It is his conspicuous absence from his seat that occasions this conversation among his disciples.

The passage in question thus presents the villagers as the innocent victims of the irony of situation. The comment which the first of them makes, finding him absent from his seat, is a very striking ironical comment on the opposition of appearance and reality. The native villager thinks of Raju as a yogi with great spiritual powers. This irony throws their initial mistake of taking him for what he is not into relief. It thus suggests that they persist in being the unwitting victims of the irony of situation. But far more striking is the incongruity of appearance and reality which finds an ironic expression in the highly memorable sentences: ‘Appearances are sometimes misleading’. Muecke has rightly observed that ‘other things being equal the greater the contrast the more striking the contradiction between intention and realization—the intention with which the institutions of police and law have been created and the results that have been fetched by them.

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Chandran, the hero of *The Bachelor of Arts*, draws up elaborate plans on the eve of his final examination. The painstaking schemes chalked out by him seem to convey to the reader the impression that he is preparing to meet an ordeal. He takes great pains to prepare a time-table with its equitable allocation to the different subjects of study of the one thousand hours that he has at his disposal: ‘Out of the daily six hours, three were to be devoted to the optional subject and three to compulsory. In the morning the compulsory subjects and Literature at night. European History needed all the freshness of the morning brain while it would be a real pleasure to read literature in the evenings’ (R. K. Naraan, p. 69)\(^1\). But what actually happens to all his best-laid schemes is at a third remove from his original intention. The time-table so painstaking drawn up is in the end thrown to the winds due to his heavy
of fiction are thus inalienably interwoven in his novels. This is the real secret of his greatness as an artist. It functions very effectively reveals his vision of life—an ambivalent attitude which evinces his grasp of life as a totality of contradictions and incongruities. It is an integral part of his vision. It is this that gives meaning and purpose to his novels by combining structure, character and style into meaningful wholes. The different components of fiction are thus inalienably interwoven in his novels. This is the real secret of his greatness as an artist.

Srinivas in *Mr. Sampath* encounters the extraordinary character of Sampath at the Bombay Anand Bhawan in Market Road. Sampath is a printer who owns the Truth Printing Works in Kabir Street. He agrees to publish Srinivas’s journal. The press is divided by a curtain. Srinivas in his simplicity comes to assume that Sampath has numerous members on the staff of his press who pursue their jobs behind the curtain. But in reality there is a young boy who is sole member of his staff; in actual fact he is the staff: ‘the curtain behind the printer parted and a head peeped out of a very young fellow’. Nevertheless, Srinivas is deceived into believing that ‘they’ all are on strike. It is after sometime that Srinivas is able to discover the error into which Sampath has led him. Srinivas thus becomes a blind victim of the irony of situation at the hands of the smart, over-confident and cunning printer. For, he is made a helpless victim of the irony by Sampath who intentionally leads him into mistaking the appearance for the reality. Once again we come across the incongruity of appearance and reality. But this example of irony is slightly different in form in as much as here it is an ironical deceiver (i.e. Sampath) rather than a non-human agency confronting Srinivas with the incongruity of appearance and reality.

*The Guide* furnishes us with numerous striking examples of Narayan’s ironic awareness of the fundamental and irresolvable opposites unalienable from human life and situations. When Raju finds it impossible to escape, he decides to make a clean breast of everything about himself. He then tells his chief disciple Velan the whole truth about himself, his relationship with Rosie, his crime and the punishment it earned for him. But the outcome of this confession was contrary to his expectations. Instead of condemning him for having trifled with the faith of simple, credulous villagers and sparing him the trouble of carrying on with the fast as Raju has expected, his confession strengthened Velan’s faith in his saintliness. It rather gave the simple-hearted peasant a sense of satisfaction arising out of the thought that of all the inhabitants of Mangala he alone was granted the privilege of being the confident of the Swami as is evinced by his reaction to Raju’s confession: ‘Why all this, Swami? It is very kind of you to address, at such length, your humble servant’ (R. K. Naraan, p. 208)\(^1\). He goes on to say, ‘And I’ll never speak a word of what I have heard to any one’, and thumping his chest in a dramatic gesture to emphasize the assurance that he will never divulge this secret, he adds, ‘it has gone down there, and there it will remain’ (R. K. Naraan, p. 209)\(^2\). Raju, who had not yet dreamt of any such result of his clean confession, is stunned; at the same time, he is filled with a sense of despair, and so every word of reverence and servility that Velan utters, pierces him to the core. He then says to himself in a manner which betrays his acceptance of the situation in which he has been placed by the ‘sheer of foolishness’ of Velan but not without cursing him for it: ‘this man will finish me before I know where I am’ (R. K. Naraan, p. 209)\(^3\). Little does he know that very soon his words will come true. Velan does become unwillingly the cause of his death. But it is not the kind of death he visualizes when he utters this sentence. It is rather the glorious death of a martyr, of one who lays down his life to bring rain (which here symbolizes life) to the starving people. On one hand, Raju here ignorantly utters something which will soon turn out to be prophetic. On the other hand, he may be taken to foretell, although in a state of utter ignorance, of what is in store for him. Velan, who is instrumental in setting him up (or his setting himself up instrumentally) as a fake saint, will now raise him to the status of a real one, by causing the death of his old self, that is, the old Raju who lived only to fulfill his bodily needs by whatever means, and thus enable the real Mahatma to be born. There are, thus, two aspects of this chance utterance of Raju; we may view his end as a juxtaposition of two opposites—death of a sensual rogue and the birth of a real Mahatma. Narayan simply juxtaposes the two mutually exclusive opinions or attitudes without any comment which may suggest what he thinks to be correct. This may be described as a superb instance of what has been termed ‘irony of a suspended judgment’ which lies in the presentation of two mutually contradictory opposites or paradoxes, any or both of which may be correct that therefore the ironist does not hazard any verdict (D. C. Muecke, p. 234)\(^4\). This device enables Narayan to achieve a balanced, all-round view, to express his awareness of life in its paradoxical totality.

We thus arrive at the conclusion that Narayan’s masterly use of irony in its diverse forms with their diverse functions very effectively reveals his vision of life—an ambivalent attitude which evinces his grasp of life as a totality of contradictions and incongruities. It is an integral part of his vision. It is this that gives meaning and purpose to his novels by combining structure, character and style into meaningful wholes. The different components of fiction are thus inalienably interwoven in his novels. This is the real secret of his greatness as an artist.
References

[2] Ibid.