

IRONIC HUMOR AS ART AND POPULAR MEDIUM IN R. K.NARAYAN'S SHORT  
STORIES WITH REFERENCE TO AN ASTROLOGER'S "DAY AND CRIME AND  
PUNISHMENT"

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ABSTRACT

R.K. Narayan enjoys immense popularity both at home and abroad, as one of the illustrious Indo- Anglican novelist and short story writer. His works bristle with innumerable familiar Indian faces. Narayan's short stories though less popular than novel has the freshness of themes from the everyday life, with the fullness and intimacy of his knowledge. He is always attracted towards the comic aspect of everyday life and expresses in his writings with brevity, which makes him a moderate successful short story writer.

George Eliot wrote about Humor as, "Humor is thinking in jest while feeling is earnest". Humor sustains interest and abounds in a language of vitality and of living expression. In Indian Writing in English, humor acquires different connotations from those of the West. The Concise Dictionary of Current Literary Terms defines Irony as, "the use of words with humorous or satirical intention, so that the meaning is the direct opposite of what is actually said" (156 Scott). R. K. Narayan is a great artisan of irony and humor. He takes irony from the real life and views in a comic aspect. This paper focuses on R. K. Narayan's use of the two devices irony and humor blended in his two short stories *An Astrologer's Day* and *Crime and Punishment*.

This research paper also tries to explain how humor and irony substantiates the story as an enjoyable one, along with his love for humanity, which is abundant. As a whole, R. K. Narayan stands culturally graceful and his ironic humor is the vicissitude of life.

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Rasipuram Krishna swami Narayan, shortly called as R.K.Narayan is the most respected novelist writing in the British common wealth. This gifted Indo-Anglican writer was born in Madras in 1907. He was the Indian stock novelist, who has spent his life in the city of Mysore in South India. He came to novel writing from journalism. His series of Malgudi, novels have put him into the forefront of Indo-Anglican literature.

R.K.Narayan is much beloved by his modern readers than any other writer. He deserves both praise and appraisal in larger and more discerning terms than he seems to have received so far, for he has produced a sizeable body of novels and collections of short stories. R.K.Narayan has written a substantial number of novels, five volumes of short stories, two collections of reportage and essays, three travel books and a memoir in supplement to many articles. Though he has distinguished in short stories, he is recognized and popular only through his novels.

In due course, R.K.Narayan's short stories draw upon the same range of experience as the novels do, but they are taken less for critical analysis. Therefore, this research article attempts to trace out his special craft in his writings, for which two short stories are taken for perspective.

Narayan's short stories are noted for his lucid narration, packed with the subject of South Indian middle class life, work, habits, expectations, predicament and religion, which gear up the plot to the central purpose. Narayan is not the writer who conceives the whole short story in advance. He weaves his incident and presents under the magic influence of his imagination, which becomes highly interesting and captures the attention of the readers.

On the other side, Narayan's short stories too are essentially Indian and he concentrates on orthodox family and incorporates numerous features of Indian life. Another aspect of Narayan's short stories are they describe the middle class milieu. The location for his short stories is the town of Malgudi, an imaginative version of Narayan's beloved Mysore.

It may be pointed out that Narayan as a short story writer is also a commentator of the broad tendencies of his society and age. Narayan says, " I keep my eyes and ears open and find plenty of material for stories in my companion either in trains, trams or buses in the streets of Mysore and Madras" ( 2 Kumar). As a good short story writer, Narayan sees to it that his story has beginning, middle and an end. The end of his short story is a solution to the problem which sets the events moving. The end achieves that completeness towards which the action has been moving and beyond which the action cannot progress. He follows the tradition of storytelling as it existed in ancient India but adopts his form and style from the west.

As a true commentator of his age and society, Narayan adopts a number of strategic devices in his short stories. These instruments of his critical strategy invite attention for their strong impact and expressiveness. Among comedy, irony, parody and satire seems to be in the fore, where they express the deeper side of the individual life of the Indians. The most striking and interesting device of R.K.Narayan is the blend of humor and irony.

Humor is a tool, which represents the author's ideas that result from the situation, character, language, and verbal. R.K.Narayan presents various shades of humor from gentle irony to parody; but his humor has been categorized to verbal humor. The strength of his writing comes from humor and binds the characters together.

Narayan's another great craft is the use irony. He is a master in irony writing. Ironies relate; to character, in terms of description, action, dialogue and to incident. His ironies are not harsh, hurting, embarrassing instead acute, enjoyable and elevate the story. His ironies can be identified as situational ironies. The notable feature in R.K.Narayan's use of ironies is that, the subject is Indian but the language is English, where they are used to give dramatic tension to the scenes.

To speak generally, Narayan's art resolved with ironic humor explores the conscientious. Narayan keeps very close to surface reality, for his aim is to reveal the tragic comedy implicit in ordinary life. This ironic humor makes his art a popular medium. This paper attempts to bring out the blend of irony and humor in his two short stories *An Astrologer's Day* and *Crime and Punishment*.

*An Astrologer's Day* and *Crime and Punishment* are two well-known short stories. *Crime and Punishment* a less appealing and unusual in the R.K. Narayan's canon have many similarities like; suspense, plot, climax, role reversal, excitement, clue, and irony and humor. However the contrasting element is the mood of the story for; *An Astrologer's Day* contains with heavy mystery and amazement, whereas *Crime and Punishment* with more relaxing light. A fascinating element in these two short stories is irony and humor, which is blended throughout the story. This brings the insights of human attitude, for there is an eye of eccentric and a flair for irony.

*An Astrologer's Day* is a typical of R.K.Narayan's short stories. The protagonist appears to be a 'real' astrologer, but he is not a real astrologer. He neither hails from an astrological family nor ardently learnt it. He simply chose the profession to get rid from a dangerous situation in his life. There is an accurate picturesque, of physical description of the astrologer in the beginning of the story, where the astrologer keeps all his professional equipments opened, wears a saffron colored turban, and his forehead bright with sacred ash and vermilion is to win the confidence of the people. The height of the ironic humor is, when his sparkling eyes are always in search for customers, but it is quite contrary when it is pictured, as how the common people visit him as: "People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks" (2, Pillai).

The astrologer is the cynosure in the market place. Every day, the astrologer used to make predictions sitting under the tree, without knowing anything about the future of his clients. He manages his clients by sheer luck, experience and pure guesswork, "He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone" (3 Pillai). The astrologer like a psychiatric doctor draws clues cleverly from their talk and creates an illusion of being genuine as given in the story as: "Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes" (4 Pillai).

The astrologer makes at people naive and stupidity as his professional success and leads life as it pushes without any commitments. R.K.Narayan pictures the innocent Indian villagers, who approach the astrologer and believe his words. Usually it is the astrologer's who give a long predictions and the clients keep silently listening, but here, it is vice versa the astrologer is a silent spectator listening the clients speech for a longer duration, is the excellent part of ironic humor narrated in a richly refractive texture, which is toned and colored beyond the usual levels of cosmic irony.

The story however palpably emerges out of the grit. One day, unexpectedly the astrologer encounters with a stranger, with whom he had picked up a quarrel and stabbed him, thinking that he had murdered. On seeing, his victim alive the astrologer felt happy and relieved and immediately accepts, for the challenge offered by the stranger. The stranger could not identify the astrologer because he was disguised as a 'real' astrologer. When the astrologer gave accurate and precise predictions about the stranger's past, the stranger was astonished, for which the astrologer replies that he knew, as he knew many other things, but he knew nothing except the client's past, because he was his youth friend turned enemy.

The height of the ironic humor is in the narration of the situation, where the astrologer was trapped before the stranger, who was committed to find the whereabouts about his enemy and take revenge on him. When the stranger questions about his present destination, there was conflict in the astrologer's mind but instantly the astrologer uses his presence of mind and convinces the stranger, which is revealed in a more detached manner as: "When shall I get at him?" he asked, clenching his first. 'In the next world 'answered the astrologer,' .....You will never see anymore of him' (7 Pillai).

It is a routine task of the astrologer to feed his customers with pack of lies, but it happens for the first time, that the astrologer tells a monstrous lie, in order to save his life by projecting himself as dead. The astrologer cunningly makes a narrow escape from being killed by the stranger, as: "Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred" (8 Pillai). This reveals the astrologer's successful plan for saving himself, who is hoping to live for a hundred years. The excellent part of ironic humor is, when the astrologer substantiates to the stranger that the person, whom he is in search is crushed in the lorry four months back. The truth behind is it was the astrologer who was alive sitting before him. The innocent stranger believed the astrologer's predictions, feels consoled, happy to some extent and pays him a handful of coins and moves towards his native place, planning not to move towards the south.

The other short story taken for reviewing is *Crime and Punishment*. It is about an impatient teacher who takes tuition to a rich, systematic, educated parent's child. The boy of course is not to the expectations of the parent, but they want him to be like a whiz kid. One day the teacher slaps the boy after getting irritated for not uttering a simple arithmetic table, after a lot of drill. Throughout the story, the teacher is exploited by the boy and the attempts of the teacher to quite the boy are narrated with corresponding ironic humor situations. In

an unexpected ending, the teacher saves the boy from his parent's, by revealing about the boy as: "Only please let him mug of the 16<sup>th</sup> table, a little more ... He is all right. He will pull through" (54 Vardarajan).

The whole story moves every inch through humor by projecting; the strains faced by the teacher and the boy's disinterest towards academic and his commitment for playing and hearing stories. The story focuses more on character for which the ironic humor substantiates. Narayan's caliber is proved in portraying the character of the boy, as projected in the beginning of the story. "According to the parents, the boy was a little angel, all dimples, smiles and sweetness – only wings lacking" (50 Vardarajan). Here, he reveals an accurate picturesque and the psyche description of the parent's opinion about the boy, but according to the teacher the boy was a useless fellow; what he needed was not cajoling but an anna worth cane. The sense of humor is however a more somber, as it is found in many stories of R.K.Narayan, the over confident attitude of the parent, who wanted the boy to come out in a systematic and realistic way is brought out in an effective language, "they wanted him to deal with the boy, as if he were made of thin glass ..... ,while his own private view was that he was in charge of a little gorilla" (51 Vardarajan).

Narayan choose the ludicrous in the life around him for treatment like any other comedy writer, an example to this is narrated with the accuracy of the rich parent, who fill the cupboard with all kinds of sweets and biscuits and leave it to the good sense of the boy, to devour is a hint that they fill everything for the welfare of the boy, but they fail to inculcate practical knowledge to the boy. His luxurious life provided him more materialistic pleasures but failed to improve his mental attitude.

The whole story packed with irony is where R.K.Narayan sustains, but the ultimate is humor with accuracy and uncanny eye for the continuing troubles faced by the teacher from the boy, where the boy is determined to play at any danger is highly commendable. "All right, watch me put the engine on its rails." If your father comes in," said the teacher. "Tell him it is an engine lesson" (52 Vardarajan). The confessions and complexities generates the whole story, along with the ironic amusement .The readers had to do a careful reading for example, when the teacher slaps the boy for refusing to tell the tables, the teacher felt ; "as if his finger was releasing the trigger:" (50 Vardarajan). But after the trigger was released, he recognized his mistake which was in imbroglia. The corporal punishment was not encouraged by the parent's, so he had to obey, the orders of the boy, who blackmailed him. Narayan exposes the boy's ignorance shadowed with a trickster character in variety of encounters and cleverly shows as how the boy tackles his teacher in the solid pieces in some way at odds with his world, example: "You must not cry for these trifling matters, You must be like a soldier..", "A soldier will shoot with a gun if he is hit," said the boy in reply" (51 Vardarajan).

In spite of the boy's continuous black mail, the story does not step out of the bounds of good humor. An unoffending irony of self- defeating activities are best accounted for by splits and ambivalence reveals the socio cultural change of the time between the teacher and the student. When the boy asks to repair the teacher, he was ignorant of it and he could not turn even the simplest screw even, if it was to save his own life. Poverty remains the underline tone of the story in spite of his affluent fragrance.

Narayan's ground in these two short stories is Indian and draws attention of human feelings. The human relations described are true, credible and they share some uniqueness. The protagonists of these two short stories are the representatives of their age and in some way at odds with their world and continue to be so. These protagonists however represent the Indian middle class life. In spite of their poverty and failures, they are cheer, hopeful and committed to their profession, for they have a compulsion to earn and there is a dire need to live-in.

Comedy prevailing from amused observations to ironic comment is present in these two short stories. The ironic humor presented here is humble, complex, possess a sense of wonder, and projects the fringes of life and fun, which is not unduly exaggerated. A very few examples along with actual text is given to highlight the ironic humor , for every word in its proper place reproduce the real fun and it is also sufficient to prove his mastery in the craftsmanship.

The two short stories along with humor are subtly controlled by the irony of the human situations; there is no attempt for serious moral. R. K. Narayan's writings do not reform or is serious like the writings of Mulk Raj Anand or Bhabani Bhattacharya but they are, interpretations of life, with simple observation of human

eccentricities, hopes, and frustrations combined with a sense of tolerance. There is no harm in calling R.K.Narayan as the greatest Indian Ironic humorist.

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