

Strategy and Theme in the Art of R. K. Narayan

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R. K. Narayan is not, of course, a new writer. He has published ten novels, a travel diary, a volume of causeries, a book on Hindu mythology, and scores of short stories. But the treatment he has been accorded by many literary critics has not done him justice because most of it has tended to be superficial or casual. No one has attempted to show, for example, how Narayan has a special way of making technique serve content.

I propose to rectify some of the superficial critical approaches to Narayan by outlining the principal strategies employed in the course of his narrative art. What I wish to probe are chiefly the general qualities in Narayan's literary strategies which establish correlations between literary form and thematic content.

Although Narayan has not innovated an *avant-garde* form for the novel, he has achieved a homogeneity of theme and strategy. A master within self-imposed limits, he has written novels that are of similar length (their rough average is 200 pages) and which have grace and poise without possessing either mass or density. They are all written essentially on the themes of equilibrium and wholeness (frequently expressed by a Nataraj leitmotif), employ cumulative ironies and architectonic coalescence, and are rounded with a cosmic vision.

At their best, the novels do not draw undue attention to their strategies for story, rather than machinery, is paramount in Narayan's art, and technique is accordingly latent or veiled by the immediacy of art casting a shadow on life. Although many of the novels are extended parables

their metaphorical cores are not self-serving but subservient to theme. When strategy becomes obvious the story is usually blemished and the force of realism vitiated. Narayan's art never reaches its highwater mark unless it conceals its techniques—recalling Dryden's familiar maxim that it is an art to conceal art.

When we probe beneath the surface of his realism we discover that Narayan is a master of suiting strategy to theme. In *Swami And Friends* (1935), for instance, it becomes evident that the episodic structure of the book is perfectly in accord with the Karmic theme. Karma is a condition which describes human destiny in terms of the consequences of all human actions, and appropriately the episodic structure of *Swami* builds an existential fate for young Swaminathan on the basis of the sum total of the boy's choices and actions.

Swami, however, is one of Narayan's slighter works and there is no problem in identifying the controlling strategy. But some of Narayan's other novels are less easy to analyse in terms of technique for the author disapproves of deliberate writing¹ and tries to use strategies that do not distract from the story.

Narayan believes in a dovetail effect or one in which the various portions of the story grow into a single piece with the joints resting neatly in harmonious relationship with one another.² This effect can be created only by one who is an expert at a type of organic writing which is self-contained, multi-dimensional, but organized according to an intuition which is perfectly congruent with life in its wholeness. Narayan's novels generally allow reality to reveal itself at its own pace and coalesce around characters. Accordingly, the novels have a sense of shape whose subtlety is sometimes revealed incrementally. Their architectonic strategy builds gradually by cumulative hints, suggestions, and sly satire.

This is amply illustrated in *The Printer of Malgudi* (1949) which is often criticized for an apparent lack of

direction. William Walsh sees it as “queerly hump-backed in shape”³ but while there is much evidence to support this charge, it is unwise to dismiss the novel as a lopsided comedy or a misconceived series of farcical digressions. The apparent loss in focus has a rationale or method behind it. Although it begins as another comedy of a confused man and develops into a satire on film production, the novel has a method to its madness. It is not Narayan who has lost his way, but Srinivas. Narayan knows all along where he is heading although it is possible and justifiable to accuse him of improper emphases from time to time. Still, emphasis is not quite the same thing as direction and although Sampath becomes the dominant character of the madcap comedy, it is Srinivas who remains the central traveller in the maze of life.

This novel employs cumulative ironies and coalescence as its key strategies to satirize the two dominant impulses in Srinivas: that towards pretentious philosophizing out of proportion with his pragmatic efficiency, and that towards an idealization of Nataraj. The first impulse is satirized by fragments and an interaction between tone and characterization. Srinivas is editor of *The Banner*, a paper that aims for truth and vision — the very elements lacking in his life. The prologue lets us follow Srinivas through the “abrupt turns” of Market Road, and suggests the maze in which the central character wanders. We are given multiple indications of Srinivas’ comically awkward bombast as he ruminates about the flow of life and his own ambiguous identity.⁴ Srinivas fancies himself to be a powerful thinker but Narayan presents him differently:

If only one could get a correct view of the world: things being neither particularly wrong nor right, but just balancing themselves. Just the required number of wrongdoers as there are people who deserved wrong deeds, just as many policemen to bring them to their senses, if possible, and just as many wrongdoers again to keep the police employed, and so on and on in an infinite concentric circle. He seized his pen and jotted down a few lines under the heading ‘Balance of Power.’ He was occupied for fully fifteen minutes. He said: ‘Don’t mis-

take me, Ravi, I had to jot down some ideas just as they came, otherwise I'd lose them forever.' He felt thrilled by the thought that he stood on the threshold of some revolutionary discoveries in the realm of human existence — solutions to many of the problems that had been teasing his mind for years. (pp. 76-77)

The subtlety of such writing is felt through the interaction of tone and characterization. Srinivas is presented as the illusion-filled ruminator of pseudo-profound subjects. What does police employment really have to do with the cosmos? And why does Srinivas take only fifteen minutes for what he feels is a startling discovery?

As the ironies are compounded we note a pattern beginning to form. The nuclear irony is that the image of equilibrium is appropriated by a character who is the very epitome of imbalance. The Nataraj leitmotif forms a mythopoeic matrix for the story for it unites character, theme, and plot around the polarities of balance and imbalance.

Srinivas reveres Nataraj but is poles apart from his idol. Nataraj is Shiva, King of cosmic dance, represented "with one foot raised and one foot pressing down a demon, his four arms outstretched, with his hair flying, the eyes rapt in contemplation, an exquisitely poised figure" (p. 19). He is a medial balance between contemplation and action, destruction and creation, movement and stillness. Srinivas, however, is the antithesis of this. Aroused by Shanti (the actress playing Parvathi in the film based on Shiva's life), Srinivas finds himself duplicating the god's lust but not his burning third eye which incinerates distraction. He is increasingly embroiled in the frenzy of events at Sunrise Pictures and, with the other principal characters, encounters confusion, instability, and hysteria.

As in the Nataraj legend, however, chaos is ironically the beginning of new order. The bedlam of the film set passes just as Sampath does, and Srinivas is left to encounter himself in the reality of life. As he tries to placate his artist-friend, Ravi, who has turned hysterical because of unrequited love for Shanti, Srinivas whispers: "Don't you worry any more about Sampath or anyone else They

all belong to a previous life" (pp. 245-46). As in Nataraj's dance, the chaos and evil of an era are destroyed and followed by order and goodness.

The closing scenes of the book assert the folly of a life lived in illusion and stress that the dissolution of hysteria is possible through a renunciation of the past and its misleading ways. "Even madness passes. Only existence asserts itself" (p. 262). When Sampath returns to relate his misadventures with Shanti, Srinivas is at first impelled by charity to invite him home but resists this impulse so that he will not repeat his former "madness." His act of dissociation from the past is symbolized by the return of the studio-key.

While this novel, with its lengthy foray into filmdom, can hardly support an imputation of symmetry, it does reveal Narayan as a clever strategist. What unifies the parts of the story is the theme of equilibrium (pre-eminently symbolized by the Nataraj image), and the Shiva-Kama sequence dovetails neatly with this theme.

Narayan consolidates his subtlety as a writer with *The Guide* (1958), a book which often comes under critical scrutiny for its technique. *The Guide* is a parable which uses a braided time-scheme but its chronology is mediocre in comparison with some of the experiments of a Faulkner, a Wilson Harris, a Robbe-Grillet, or a Proust, and it would therefore seem that its special achievement lies in a less obvious strategy.

The tempo of the story is a clue to its strategy. Early in the plot there are frequent interruptions, pauses, and breaks in the narrative but these, upon reflection, accord well with Raju's agitation and changes in identity. They convey a sense of chaos within Raju's life but gradually yield to a more settled flow which slowly and surely reaches its moment of truth.

The initial agitation matches Raju's inner turmoil and the technique is almost cinematic in its jump-cuts and flashbacks. In the opening scene, Raju's isolation is broken

by Velan's intrusion. Rambling talk is followed by a flashback to Raju's release from prison.⁵ Raju does not narrate the content in his flashback; he merely re-lives it mentally. But these private thoughts are interrupted by Velan's revelation that he has a problem. Before the problem can be articulated, Raju cuts in with his story on Rosie. The impression conveyed by this sequence of recurring interruptions is one of compulsive momentum — indicative of Raju's imbalance. He plays one role after another (actor, king, god, doctor, and guide) (pp. 14, 15, 18 and 9) in this sequence and shows the lack of a fixed or authentic identity. He becomes the image of what Velan wants him to be and this generates further agitation.

As the tale progresses, there is an intersection of Raju's past turbulence and the turmoil growing out of his false roles as *guru* and *mahatma*. We are told of his rise and fall as he moved from being a railway guide to Rosie's manager and thence to a convicted criminal. But as his turbulent past unfolds we are also shown that his new role as spiritual guide is leading him deeper into confusion. The guide gets lost in the flux of his changing identity.

Technique or strategy becomes an intricate thing for Narayan does not wish to pile ironic parallels upon one another in a crude way. As Raju's fate is the proper subject of the tale the narrative is episodic and, as in *Swami And Friends*, harmonizes with the Karmic idea.

The nature of Raju's victimization is an irony and is emphasized by paradox. Raju attains merit by default and Narayan establishes situations whence such a paradox can occur. When Raju ends the village fighting he does so through a sequence of misunderstandings which begins when Velan's moronic brother garbles Raju's message to the villagers. Raju is unexpectedly sanctified as a holy man who will work a miracle to save the people.

The final section of the story contains a double paradox. Raju is ironically pushed into a deed for the entire community after he has isolated himself. He finds that for

the first time in his life he makes an earnest effort to perform a deed in which he is not personally interested (p. 169). This brings him spiritual merit for it is an unselfish and authentic deed, but because it creates a vast audience the deed leaves Raju the object of mass curiosity.

Narayan's narrative becomes astringent in its braiding of time and plot. After commencing as a complex cross-hatching of past and present, the narrative settles into a simple linear design, but the ending carries the central character out of consciousness and time into timelessness. When Raju reaches the culmination of his fast, the sounds of humanity lessen, then disappear from his consciousness. His physical debilitation takes its toll and Raju sinks (losing his *physical* balance) in the swelling water as the event reaches its metaphysical fulfillment (pp. 175-76). All the moments in his life are knotted together into a single instance of "ripeness" or fruition. "All things have to wait their hour," says Raju early in the book (p. 38) and it is Narayan's strategy to gather together the threads of time and join them in a single dramatic epiphany when the protagonist becomes least conscious of time and the external world and most conscious of his deed and psychic balance.

The Guide is, of course, only one example of Narayan's parabolic art where story and character are unified in a dialectical pattern which ends in a moral. Although *The Guide* makes its points without pushing too hard there are other stories by Narayan which are tainted by an overly insistent didacticism. Both *The Dark Room* (1938) and *Waiting For The Mahatma* (1955) are illustrations of such misadventure and they are especially interesting examples for they provide an early and a later view respectively of Narayan's art. *The Dark Room* has as its protagonist Savitri, a wife in rebellion against her tyrannical husband and the Indian convention of acquiescence. *Waiting For The Mahatma* is a conversion parable, sanctified by the presence of Gandhi and written as a testa-

ment to Sriram's moral transformation into a disciple of Gandhian *satyagraha* (truth-force). However, *The Dark Room* has language that is sometimes stiff and characters (apart from Savitri) who are made of cardboard. Moreover, the resolution of the conflict — which describes Savitri's return to her domestic context — compromises Narayan's concern for psychic integrity. This restraint on his own satire deprives the book of a proper critical vision and a similar drawback occurs in *Waiting* where the attempt to compose a Gandhian *purana* (legendary tale) doesn't quite succeed because the portrait of the Mahatma is, at best, sketchy and, at worst, clichéd. Moreover, politics is not Narayan's forte and the turbulent political atmosphere of the Gandhian period is not well exploited by the author. Narayan lacks both the depth and the brutality of criticism to carry his writing beyond its surface satire. Without the mordant savagery of a Jonathan Swift or the acerbic irony of V.S. Naipaul, Narayan appears to be half in love with his satirical subjects. His dénouements consequently betray a halfhearted or unconvincing quality of attack.

On the whole, the true value of Narayan's parables lies in their *comédie-humaine* realism. *The Sweet-Vendor* (1967) shows what Narayan can do with a story whose subject does not require more powers than he possesses. There is a straight-forward presentation of character and the lesson emerges clearly. The conclusion of the book, although representative of a traditional Hindu view of life, is developed organically out of the increasing bemusement of Jagan over modern values which corrupt life.

Perhaps, though, the finest parable by Narayan in terms of the balance between the abstract weight of the story and the concreteness of setting is *The Financial Expert* (1952) which is the highly entertaining story of a small-time businessman who acquires a Midas touch and with it a sequence of boons and banes in life. The expansion and contraction of Margayya's fortunes become the central

leitmotif as Narayan reveals his interest in human equilibrium. What is under scrutiny here is not the concept of materialism *per se* but an individual's intemperate responses to his own materialistic appetites. The old proverb "money is the root of all evil" is most pertinent to the parable which, however, terminates in Margayya's renunciation of his nefarious materialism and his re-entry into the joys of community. Two achievements of this parable are the lesson in the moral toll taken of Margayya during his extravagant materialism, and the strong framework of social conventions to which Narayan is sympathetic. To Narayan it is just as important to develop the little nuances in setting as it is to reveal the huge ambitions, unintended villainies, and inveterate vanities of character. What results is a highly memorable locale with equally memorable social and religious norms against which the leading characters are set in conflict. Thus, if we remember Margayya's ambition we are apt to recall his ritualistic propitiations to Lakshmi. If we think of Margayya's materialistic grossness we must also think of the domestic tenderness he first forsakes and ultimately retrieves. All in all, Narayan's parable combines metaphor and literal reality within an engrossing human comedy without submitting the story to a moral it cannot support.

When Narayan intends his tales to carry more significance than their plots could support his art falls victim to a curious and disturbing collision between realism and fabulism. Such a collision occurs in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1962) which, in illustrating a classic psychomachy, reads more like a *roman à thèse* than an authentic interpretation of life. The moral persuasion is so overt that the plot appears to be a mechanical design of a mythic formula. What we feel at the end is a considerable disappointment about the forced and intractable relationship between realism and fabulism.

The pivotal conflict is derived from a Hindu legend where Nataraj contested a *rakshasa* or demon. The protagonist

in Narayan's story is named Nataraj and his antagonist, Vasu, is a veritable demon associated as he is with darkness, violence, animality, and evil. What emerges with increasing clarity is Narayan's version of the Bhasmasura legend where the *asura* or enemy of the gods is given a special boon whereby everything he touches is scorched. Bhasmasura, invincible among men, makes humanity suffer greatly until Vishnu's intercession. Vishnu incarnates himself as a female dancer of great beauty (Mohini) with whom the *asura* becomes infatuated. Mohini promises to yield to him only if Bhasmasura imitates all her dance gestures. At one point in the dance, Mohini places her palms on her head, and the demon follows suit in complete forgetfulness of his own special blight. The *asura* scorches himself into ash and the poetic justice of the gods is asserted.⁶

Just as the Bhasmasura legend has its divinely ordained end, the Vasu story has its expected pattern. Instead of Mohini there is Rangi, a temple prostitute, who is temptress and vanquisher of Vasu. The illegitimate daughter of a temple dancer, Rangi entices Vasu by her sensuality and plays an important role in his destruction. A further strengthening in the association between the Bhasmasura legend and the Vasu tale occurs through the incident with Kumar, the temple elephant. Vasu diabolically plans the death of Kumar who is commissioned to guard the shrine of a goddess. The elephant (like the monkey, boar, and tortoise) has a special significance in Hindu mythology for Gajendra was a legendary elephant who was once rescued from peril by the god Krishna. As Kumar stands in the midst of an elaborate celebration, Nataraj recalls the legend of Gajendra and one more link is formed with the *rakshasa* myth (pp. 140-41).

As the plot progresses we see how faithful Narayan is to the sentiments and patterns of Hindu mythology. Rangi betrays Vasu — although not identically in the manner of a Mohini — by informing on his plot to kill Kumar. Vasu's

great physical strength is reduced to an inert mass of flesh, and Nature survives the *rakshasa's* threat. There is a further parallel between the Vasu tale and the Bhasmasura legend although it is implausible to my mind on the level of realism. When Vasu kills himself by a blow aimed at mosquitoes which have settled on his forehead (p. 185), the entire story loses its force and shrivels to the level of a melodramatic re-creation of the Bhasmasura legend. It is as if Narayan felt compelled to squeeze his story into a mould pre-established by mythology.

However, we cannot deny the achievements of *The Man-Eater*. The story looks to a macrocosmic harmony beyond the pale of Malgudi and, despite a depression in the fabric of realism, fortifies the impression of Narayan's optimism. As Sastri explains puckishly, humanity survives the demons because of divine providence which curses every *rakshasa* with a tiny seed of self-destruction (p. 185). A second virtue lies in the easy flow of the story — for at least most of the way — and we do see Narayan's ability to control tone, character, and plot without losing his focus.

What conclusions, then, are to be drawn about the principal strengths and weaknesses in Narayan's art? My survey has tried to indicate that this art is conservative in strategy by observing its preference for a direct coalescence around life rather than for an innovation in structure. It is an art which bears a strong inclination to be parabolic and steeped in *comédie-humaine* realism. At its most fluent, it possesses a mobility which creates for an audience the sense that life is immediately present at the moment of contact with fictional characters, and a special feeling of congruence between strategy and theme. At its worst, it reveals collisions between form and content which nevertheless do not obscure its creator's penchant for a good story.

NOTES

¹Ved Mehta, "The Train Had Just Arrived At Malgudi Station" *New Yorker*, 15 Sept., 1962, pp. 64, 67.

²Ved Mehta, pp. 78, 79.

³William Walsh, "Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vinegar: the Novels of R. K. Narayan," *A Human Idiom* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 129.

⁴R. K. Narayan, *The Printer Of Malgudi* (Michigan State University Press, 1957), p. 12. Subsequent references to this edition appear in my text.

⁵Narayan, *The Guide* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), pp. 8-9. Subsequent references to this edition appear in my text.

⁶Narayan, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (London: Four Square Books, 1965), p. 76. Subsequent references to this edition appear in my text.