

# An Analysis of Narayan's Technique

VINEY PAL KAUR KIRPAL

AN UNOSTENTATIOUS BUT effective technique has earned for R. K. Narayan, fallaciously though, the reputation of being a *simple* writer. The plainness of his technique is the illusion of his art.

Narayan draws upon the traditional narrative technique of the storyteller effectively reiterating his traditional, typically Hindu perception of life. Uma Parameswaran's somewhat pejorative judgement that "Narayan is a story-teller, nothing less and seldom more"<sup>1</sup> is actually his strength.<sup>2</sup> He is a past master in the art of storytelling. He is like the traditional storyteller, *Kathavachak*, narrating his tales, one after the other in the cumulative, reverberative fashion of the chain stories of the *Panchatantra*.<sup>3</sup>

Like the *Panchatantra*, Narayan's stories and novels are not "conclusive." The conclusion of one could well be the beginning of another. The themes, characters and locale of one work flow into the next until all his works taken together create the effect of a whirlpool. Swami grows up to become Chandran (*The Bachelor of Arts*) who in turn becomes Krishna. The metaphysical quest of life in *The Bachelor of Arts* is developed in *The English Teacher*, *Mr. Sampath* and *The Guide*. Each work exists individually and as a member of a collection unfolding a total vision of life. This is the mark of a genuine writer.

In yet another way, Narayan's fiction is like the *Panchatantra*. Its themes are primarily ethical. Like the stories of the *Panchatantra*, Narayan's stories celebrate *dharma* and uphold harmony. The familiar pattern of a Narayan novel/short story, especially of the later ones, is the disruption of order<sup>4</sup> by the

evil forces briefly triumphing, followed by the reassertion of order and harmony with the powers of darkness duly vanquished. Always it is the ethical norm that wins. Even in his earlier, domestic novels, the restoration of harmony had been the chief objective; the disruption having been caused by the abandonment of tradition, order is restored by a restored loyalty, a deeper understanding and appreciation of tradition. This *dharma* is enacted in an imaginary small town in the South of India, and the life of the microcosm becomes a reflection of the macrocosmic drama. The local, the particular, is transformed into the universal, the general — which is the way of all great art — as in the films, for instance, of Satyajit Ray.

Ved Mehta has said that Narayan displays a remarkable ability to reconcile contrarities: "For me, the magic of his unpretentious, almost unliterary novels is his astonishing marriage of opposite points of the compass."<sup>5</sup> Narayan's principal devices to achieve this "marriage of opposites" are irony and ambiguity. They help him to suggest the unpredictable, unknown quality of life. The point becomes clear if we compare him with Ruth Praver Jhabvala who is also noted for her irony.

While Mrs. Jhabvala's irony attempts social correction by focusing on the hypocrisies, false values and social pretensions of her characters, Narayan through his use of irony brings out the latent vulnerability of the human condition and how it catches the individual unawares exposing him to the laughter of comedy or the tears of tragedy. It is free of judgement and didacticism. Raju, the fake Sadhu, is compelled into real sainthood and martyrdom because his message to the villagers is hopelessly misinterpreted by the village idiot (*The Guide*, p. 87). Krishna and Susila in *The English Teacher* are enchanted by the new house they want to rent without realizing that it will be their heartbreak house.

Ambiguity enables Narayan to prevent the reader from arriving at simplistic readings. It is his equivalent of Keats's "negative capability." Did Malathi in *The Bachelor of Arts* return Chandran's love? Did it actually rain in *The Guide*? Did Margayya in *The Financial Expert* grow wealthy because he prayed or because he sold pornographic books? We do not know. The

novelist plays the creator, but he is not "the boss" of the show. He confesses that he really does not know whether it happened *this* way or *that*. Between irony and ambiguity the distinction is a fine one. In the one, the surprise seems to be on the characters; in the other, doubt is created in the mind of the reader so that his understanding of the character's dilemma or fate is accompanied by an awareness of the complexity of life. Together, irony and ambiguity in Narayan work to reproduce the opposed, paradoxical, apparently irreconcilable facets of human experience and prevent rash judgement of the characters caught irretrievably in the web of extraordinary circumstance.

Finally, as if arising from his typically Indian metaphysical view of life, Narayan's works including *The English Teacher* and *The Guide* (though in both there is death and the tragic element) are not tragedies.<sup>6</sup> *The English Teacher* concludes on a note of resolution — Krishna comes to terms with his wife's death through a philosophic vision of life cultivated over a period of time. *The Guide*, though it ends in Raju's death, is also not a tragedy because the weight of his death is lost in the magnitude of his spiritual gain and attainment. All of Narayan's other works lead up to a nearly tragic situation which is averted or defused just in time. The elephant carrying the idols of Krishna and Radha in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* is saved in the nick of time. Chandran, disappointed in love, thinks of suicide, takes to *sanyas* instead, which in Hindu thought and the ritual of *Sanyasa* initiation is regarded as death. All of Narayan's works sight the tragic peak, but climb down to normal existence. The "big" events of life are not really big. There is no need to get exercised over the series of little events that life is composed of. In retrospect, Chandran's distress and rage at Malathi's marriage seem comic when three years later he marries Susila. In the steady, unceasing flow of eternity, everything that seems ultimate turns out to be penultimate, even pre-penultimate. Life is full of "tremendous trifles." Crises will come and get blown away and the eccentric Town Hall Professor in *The Painter of Signs* speaks for his creator, as it were, when he tells his clients — "*This will pass.*"

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1976), p. 46.
- <sup>2</sup> "I'd be quite happy if no more is claimed from me than being just a storyteller. Only the story matters, that's all." R. K. Narayan, "Only The Story Matters," an interview in *India Today*, Vol. VII, No. 3, February 1-15, 1982, 61.
- <sup>3</sup> It is debatable how far Narayan has consciously followed the narrative method of the *Panchatantra*. However, there are similarities between the technique of his novels and that of the *Panchatantra*.
- <sup>4</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that Narayan's novels reveal a basic pattern of Order-Disorder-Order. See *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English* (New Delhi, Heinemann, 1971), p. 154.
- <sup>5</sup> *John Is Easy To Please* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p. 109.
- <sup>6</sup> For the Hindu mind, basically religious, the adoption of a finally or ultimately tragic view of life is impossible. It may be observed that there are no tragedies in Sanskrit literature.