

Narrative Techniques in R K Narayan's Writings

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Abstract

The narrative technique is an inseparable part of the novel. Narayan employed different narrative techniques in his fiction. Narayan writes about social issues and problems of south Indian especially common people in his novels and stories. Narayan has taken up social problems of day to day life; and he has attempted to solve the issues through the intellect of characters. He presents the traditional narrative technique of the storyteller effectively. Narayan is considered as a 'born story-teller' or 'a first-rate story-teller'. The wide variety of themes in Narayan's stories is paralleled by an equally satisfying variety of techniques.

Keywords: Narrative Techniques, R K Narayan, The Talkative Man

Introduction

The present paper deals with the narrative techniques employed in the fiction of the prolific writer, Narayan, delineating how the writer used the narrative techniques, narrative mode, point of view, elements of narrative, kinds of narrator, and types of narrative techniques.

Technique is a significant weapon for the writer to write his/her literary work or work of art successfully. Narrative technique is the means of producing a specific effect of a novel. With the employment of right technique only the writer would be able to convey his/her ideas to the readers.

Techniques are employed to act as the mediator between life and art assisting the writer in interpreting and transforming truth. This creation includes the work of several devices. It is the 'how' (technique) as opposed to the 'what' (subject) is instrumental in causing archetype shifts, in establishing scholarly schools and in initiating major literary patterns. Consequently narrative technique is not just an adornment or very forced element upon the content to give it extra worth but the basic quality of the subject matter itself.

Narrative and Narrative Technique

The word 'narrative' is defined by different authors such as: according to Rimmon Kenan, "Narrative is a technical word taken from Latin verb 'narrare' which means 'to recount' and is related to the adjective 'gnarus' means 'knowing' or 'skilled.' Ultimately it is derived from the proto Indo European root 'gno' means 'to know.' The word 'story' may be used as a synonym of 'narrative' and also it is used to refer to the sequence of events described in a narrative".

Roland Barthes defines as: "The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances -as though any material

were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation". Sarbin (1986) describes as: "The narrative is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening".

The narrative technique is an inseparable part of the novel. Novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will be found, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts; the story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread (Henry James, 2001). Narrative technique is one of the most important aspects of imaginative literature that is the mirror of an era reflecting not only the external features of that time but also its inner face.

Narayan's Narrative Techniques

Narayan is a conceived narrator, without interest in complex socio-economic issues or inquiries of technique or form; he just considers the story matters. He portrays the story both at the shallow level where the region is ruling and at the more profound level where general certainties are consolidated in imaginative terms. The particular tone of his narration creates humor and his story technique is basic and conventional.

As per the views of P.S.Ramana (1993), most of Narayan's short stories are third person narration; the vision of the unobtrusive narrator is generally restricted to one character or episode only. He frequently gives the 'inside views' of the characters and talks from a marginally higher good position. He stays isolates and notices the characters in an uninvolved and entertained way. The narrative stance is not deliberately planned by the writer, but is rather a natural sequence of the individual and philosophical inclinations of the writer.

R.K. Narayan writes about social issues and problems of south Indian especially common people in his novels stories. He observes South India as a fundamentally conservative Hindu society which he realistically presents in most of his novels and stories with the lower middle class common man as his base. The most important feature of Narayan's fiction is perhaps his commitment towards his

imagined town Malugudi. In his writings, Narayan has taken up social problems of day to day life. He has attempted to solve the issues through the intellect of characters.

One of the dominant features of Narayan's short stories is the reportorial quality that one finds in them. Before beginning his literary career, Narayan had worked as a news reporter to The Justice and has been a regular contributor of his stories to the popular newspaper The Hindu. Therefore some of his stories are of the magazine-type having a kind of newspaper origin. Moreover they have either simple plots or are at least colorful vignettes and sketches. In some of the stories Narayan makes use of the Talkative Man as his objective reporter. His narration from his personal experience imparts verisimilitude and credibility to the stories. In all these stories, the first person oral narration is reported by a third person narrator who begins with the cryptic introduction: "The Talkative Man said." In "A Night of the Cyclone", the third person narrator comes back at the end of the story to finish it. In "The Tiger's Claw" and "The Snake Song" the introductory narration by third person is slightly longer and he finishes the story after the reminiscent narration of the talkative man has ended. Narayan makes use of first person passive participant narrators in stories such as "Uncle", "Annamalai" and "A Breath of Lucifer", while in stories like "The Second Opinion", "At the Portal" and "An Accident" the first person passive participant narrators are just observers of action. But the change in the person of the narrator does not alter the narrative structure of the story in any significant way. "All the first person narrators of Narayan are as reliable as the third person narrators" (Ramana 133).

The ancient technique of storytelling in the Indian tradition inspired Narayan. The incidents in some of his stories are narrated by the character that is 'The Talkative Man'. Narayan tells us in 'The World of the Story Teller':

The Talkative Man' is a part and parcel of the Indian village community, which is somewhat isolated from the mainstream of life ... He is the source of entertainment in the village, a grand old man who seldom stirs from his ancestral home on the edge of the village ... except on some very special occasion ... when people want a story at the end of a day's labours in the field, especially on evenings when moon shines through the coconut palms ... on such occasions the story teller will dress himself for the part by smearing sacred ash on his forehead and wrapping himself in a green shawl... when the story teller comes to seat himself in front of the lamps, he looks imperious and in complete control of the situation... He can never really be handicapped, through the lack of understudy of assistants, as he is completely self-reliant, knowing as he does by heart all the twenty – four thousand stanzas of the Ramayana, 1.00.000 stanzas of The Mahabharat and the 18.000 stanzas of the Bhagawata. (R.K. Narayan, P. 132).

Narayan presents the traditional narrative technique of the storyteller effectively reiterating his traditional, typically Hindu perception of life. Urna Parameswaran criticizes that Narayan is a story-teller; nothing less and seldom more is actually his strength. 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*.

The Talkative Man is a prototype of the *Bodhisatva of Jataka Tales*. The Talkative Man uses a method of dramatized mode of narration. It is an effective way of achieving a sense of objectivity which provides the writer a vantage point for commenting on the characters and the situations. Narayan's readers can understand that he uses Talkative Man as a resourceful raconteur to narrate a story with spontaneous delight, spinning his yarns from a variety of situations. He tells his story with all its drama, suspense and excitement, aiming to provide entertainment to the audience. He appears himself as a man of wide travel and experience, making his character delight to constitute the chief attraction of his stories.

It is the technique of depersonalization for achieving objectivity which is the most characteristic feature of Narayan's fiction. He uses The Talkative Man as a generic rather than a specific name suggests that he conceives him as a typical character.

Narayan uses the first person narrator as his medium to achieve a measure of ironic distance from the narrative. At the same time, he also suggests an ironic attitude towards the narrator while engrossing us with the narrative charm and value of his stories. Thus he makes a masterly combination of tradition and innovation. Narayan presents about nine stories narrated by The Talkative Man in the collections of *Lawley Road and Other Stories* and *An Astrologers Day and Other Stories*. The stories are "The Roman Image," "The Tiger's Claw," "A Career," "The Snake Song," "Engine-Trouble," "Lawley Road," and "A Night of Cyclone," and so on, narrated by the same person called the Talkative Man. Though these stories have a common narrator offering an exposition of a given situation by means of an ironic detachment, they were not all written at the same time.

The Tiger's Claw, that is an excellent example of The Talkative Man's gift for inventiveness, is about his supposed encounter with a tiger in a remote village. The talkative Man begins the anecdote with many significant details regarding his visit to the remote village. Next, he gives a vivid account of the actual place of the encounter, the humming and rustling sounds disturbing the stillness of the night, his own sense of being forlorn, and of his dream about full-grown tigers. He creates masterfully an atmosphere appropriate to real fight with a prowling tiger. He recreates the fight so tellingly that its drama, excitement, suspense and humour combine to orchestrate the vividness of an encounter.

The Talkative Man's technique in general is that he begins with the familiar world of facts, then moves on to the plane of the improbable or fantastic or both, and finally returns to the world of actuality he started from. The narration is deceptively simple since it is ironic in tone. The Talkative Man, like most of

Narayan's first person narrators, is more of a method and less of a character. The stories narrated by him reveal Narayan's inventive workmanship, narrative gusto and above all, an intelligent grasp of the psychology of readers.

Narayan employs third person-narrator in his short stories. The third person narration is also called 'limited omniscience' in the sense that the focus is on the protagonist. Sometimes the author deliberately intrudes on the narration. This gives a sense of participation of the author and adds a realistic touch to the story. It also helps the reader in understanding the clues. The intrusion serves yet another purpose – it reveals the character of the protagonist.

An Astrologer's Day is a fine example of Narayan's use of third person narrator. The focus is always on the protagonist, an astrologer. The astrologer "had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life: (*The Astrologer's Day*. P.2). It was a life forced upon him. He fled from his village as he left a person for dead in a well. One evening when he is about to go back to his house, a stranger comes to him and requests him to foretell if he would get the man who tried to kill him. The astrologer felt very uncomfortable and tried desperately to free himself. After a good deal of haggling the astrologer took courage and said: "“You were left for dead am I right?” “Ah, tell more”. “A knife had passed through you once”, said the astrologer. “Good fellow”. He bared his chest to show the scar. “What else ?” “And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead”. (*An Astrologer's Day*, P.5)

Narayan's third person device, that is the omniscient narrator, is the oldest technique of a fiction writer. The omniscient narrator knows everything about everything and thus gives the writer enough scope so that he can narrate the story and sketch characters and details of incidents. The device coordinates and establishes direct rapport between the narrator and the reader.

Narayan uses the technique of irony in order to bring out the contradictions inherent in human nature and experience and shows these as the shaping forces in human relationship.

There is always a same kind of narrative strategy in his works. The narration is done either in the first person or in the third person. A detached, humorous voice is heard in his narrative tone. There is absolutely no emotional involvement in the characters created. Rather, the relationship between the creator and the created is rational. The protagonist and the border characters are given equal importance since the former's fate always depends on the actions and activities of the latter.

The wide variety of themes in Narayan's short stories is paralleled by his employment of a variety of techniques. The direct method of narration is of course his favourite, but there are also other techniques successfully employed by him in stories whose situations and his own artistic intentions call for

techniques other than the third person narrative. The epistolary method has been used to real advantage by Narayan in the story *Uncle's Letters* where, in the course of half-a- dozen letters, the whole life- span of the Talkative Man's nephew is scanned. It is an example of Narayan's awareness of the Western techniques.

R.K.Narayan's short stories cover a plethora of emotions. It is the right balance between humour, and a dose of drama to cater to different moods of the reader. He used in his short stories a simple artistic narrative style. The descriptions make the reader to see the setting clearly. Add to the perfect blend of beautiful 'Malgudi' with its rural charm and eccentric to ordinary characters, the narrative is complete. Most of his stories deal with normal people and their lives in a mainly middle class milieu in South India. Malgudi is an imaginary town set in the southern part of the country, but every reader feels it as if real. His style is using simple narrative. The stories are filled with gentle irony and witty humour. The human comedy that Narayan depicts blends the realism of western fiction with the mythology of traditional India. Narayan's characters pass through many trials and they overcome them. Narayan presents this with narrative simplicity and a keen understanding of human foibles. He has never given into fashionable trends in fictional technique. Though he was a journalist and a teacher he did not go for highly sophisticated language.

In a good number of stories, Narayan followed the principle of irony of reversal. Swamy ("Father's Help") is a familiar name in Narayan. The title of his first novel was *Swami and Friends* (1935). Swami, a small child is the protagonist in a number of short stories such as "A Hero", "Father's Help" etc. The word 'Swami' brings to the readers mind the picture of a venerable, bearded and aged figure, working as a recurrent symbol. But the name of the protagonist is manifestly ironical as the contrast between what is said and what is meant is revealed in the very opening lines of the story:

Lying in bed, Swami realised with shudder that it was Monday morning. It looked as though only a moment ago it had been the last period on Friday; already Monday was there. He hoped that an earthquake would reduce the school building to dust, but that good building – Albert Mission School - had withstood similar prayers a hundred years now. (An Astrologer's Day, P.125)

So, Naryan portrayed Swami as a naughty school boy who dislikes going to school, pretends illness and even wants to frame false allegations against his class teacher. Narayan often uses the privilege of omniscient narrator to offer what Swami thinks and does:

Swami went to school, feeling that he was the worst perjurer on earth. His conscience bothered him: he wasn't at all sure if he had been accurate in his description of Samuel. He could not decide how much of what he said was imagined and how much of it real. He stopped for a moment on the roadside to make up his mind about Samuel ... (An Astrologer's Day, P.127).

In a few of his short stories Narayan, in addition to the irony of reversal, links irony with the revelation of human psychology. In "*Gandhi's Appeal*" Padma is moved by Gandhi's appeal for funds and donates her gold bangles. On returning to her house she is afraid of revealing the loss to her husband who had warned her earlier. When at last she discloses her mistake, she learns that her husband too has committed a similar mistake for he was drifted towards the meeting unwillingly with fifty rupees in his pocket and dropped them into Gandhiji's charity box.

In the story, "The Axe", Narayan used the technique as a literary device to demonstrate the arrangement of events. The story tells us how a beautiful garden was planted after clearing the jungle on the outskirts of Malgudi. Velan, who comes to Malgudi from Koopal village starts here as a labourer and then becomes the head gardener and caretaker of the owner's house. However, the property changes hand in course of time and the new owner wants to construct a new building in place of the garden. Velan, who came from village Koopal, started as a labourer and then became the gardener and the sole occupant in the house, finally returns to Koopal without any perceptible change in his life or fortune.

O' Henry's celebrated technique of the 'trick finale' is observed in Narayan's fiction. The sense of sudden surprise or twist that is a characteristic note appears in many of his short stories. At the end of a story, this device leads to the shock discovery or reversal.

A case in point is "An Astrologer's Day". A town astrologer meets a client and reads his past correctly, saying that a man had knifed him in a village brawl years before. He tells the man that the person who knifed him is already dead and adds, "I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home." The story ends with a shock of discovery that the astrologer himself was the person who knifed that man.

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Conclusion

Narayan employed different narrative techniques in his fiction. Most of Narayn's short stories are third person narration; the narrator is generally restricted to one character or episode only; and he frequently gives the 'inside views' of the characters. R.K. Narayan writes about social issues and problems of south

Indian especially common people in his novels stories. Narayan has taken up social problems of day to day life; and he has attempted to solve the issues through the intellect of characters. He presents the traditional narrative technique of the storyteller effectively reiterating his traditional, typically Hindu perception of life.

Therefore, Narayan's short stories exhibit a great variety in the narration of the episodes, stories and anecdotes: the third person narration, the omniscient narration, the technique of reportage, the epistolary form of narration etc. Eminent critics like Henry Miller and Anthony West acknowledge Narayan as a 'born story-teller' or 'a first-rate story-teller'. They recognize the simple, unpretentious and natural grace of his narrative art. In fact, the wide variety of themes in Narayan's stories is paralleled by an equally satisfying variety of techniques. The sheer narrative value of his short stories induces a freshness and new dimension to the art of story-telling.

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