

Narayan's Sense of Audience

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R. K. NARAYAN is one of those creative writers who make a living out of their writing. He has struggled very hard to establish himself, i.e., to make himself and his works acceptable to a particular audience in the English-speaking world. Narayan's awareness of his audience is matched by his acute understanding of the commercial aspect of imaginative writing. Describing the book buying situation in his home town (Mysore) in an article published in 1953 he says that among a population of two hundred and seventy-five thousand persons capable of reading and appreciating his books and financially able to buy them, only 200 copies of his novel, *The Bachelor of Arts*, had been sold.¹ In another essay, Narayan says, "The commercial aspect of literary life is alien to our culture; and book-buying and book-keeping [*sic*] are not considered important. Our tradition is more 'Aural,' that means a story-teller is in greater demand than the story-writer. The story-teller who has studied the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, may take up any of the thousand episodes in them, create a narrative with his individual stamp on it, and hold the attention of an audience, numbering thousands, for hours, while the same man if he sat down to write his stories would hardly make a living out of his work. Being ideal listeners by tradition, our public are not ideal readers."² Because of this non-commercial outlook on writing, the writer is considered above wants; he writes to please himself. On the other hand, in the West the commercial outlook on writing has never been looked down upon. Narayan would agree with Dr. Johnson: "No one except an idiot ever wrote but for money." Because of the apathy of Indians to book buying, Narayan published almost all his

books first abroad and then in India. After their acceptance in the West, his novels have of late been prescribed in Indian Universities on undergraduate and postgraduate syllabuses. As a result, his sales increased in India in the sixties and the seventies. Even so it cannot be said that Narayan has become popular with Indian readers.

In this connection, certain facts throw interesting light on the relative standing of Narayan in India and the English speaking world. Between 1935 and 1952 his novels appeared first in England. Indian reprints came several years later. From 1953, he caught on in the United States when Michigan State College Press published six of his novels during a period of three years from 1953-1955. After 1955 Narayan's novels have been first published in America, then in Britain and lastly in India. To consider commercial publication of his novels in England and America alone, *The Financial Expert* was published by Noonday (six editions) and Time; *The Guide* by Signet and Penguin; *The Man-eater of Malgudi* by New English Library (Four Square); *The English Teacher* by Pyramid; *Printer of Malgudi* by Arena; *The Vendor of Sweets* by Avon; *Swami and Friends* by Fawcett and Oxford. Paperback editions of all his novels are now being reissued in America by Chicago University Press and in England by Heinemann. Some of his novels have also been translated and published in Russia, Poland, France, Israel, East and West Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Holland, and Yugoslavia.⁸

Narayan shows keen awareness of the demands put on him by the Western readers and publishers. Foreign publishers, he writes, expect an Indian writer "to say something close to the image of India that they have in mind."⁴ This problem is not faced by writers writing in Indian languages for Indian readers because both have the same values and they participate in the same range of experience. Foreign readers crave the Indian flavour and for them this flavour is exotic. Most of the articles published about India in American and British newspapers and magazines bear out this view. Narayan himself has succumbed to the temptation of producing pot-boilers such as "New Role for India's Holy Men," "Ghee is Good," and "Why Go Matha is Loved" which

he wrote with an eye on the audience of *New York Times Magazine*.⁵

Narayan's own limitations reinforced by his desire to write for the reading public in England and America have clearly demarcated the frontiers of his art. When asked in an interview how he "picked up" themes for his novels and stories, he replied "that he waits for 'some propitious moment' — an incident, a report in the papers, an eccentric he stumbles across. Any of these becomes 'a jumping off ground for a chain of ideas.'"⁶ Almost all his novels start with a situation or character which seems to come straight from life, after which the novels develop in the writing. Narayan is not the novelist who conceives the whole novel in advance. It is not to be wondered at that most of his novels are not well-made.

Narayan has an eye for the absurd in Indian life. With the observation of eccentric characters in absurd situations, he is entertaining. He is a gifted caricaturist. By careful selection and exaggeration of details, the characters are made to look entertainingly grotesque. Let us take up just one character: Jagan, who is a sweet vendor in the novel to which Narayan gives the same title. Jagan is a Gandhian but he does not pay the sales-tax. "If Gandhi had said somewhere, 'Pay your sales tax uncomplainingly,' he would have followed his advice, but Gandhi had made no reference to the sales tax anywhere to Jagan's knowledge."⁷ Narayan describes at length his comic fads and theories of living. Jagan plies charkha which was Gandhi's prescription for the economic ills of the country as well as for any deep agitation of mind. His *jibba* and the *dhoti* are both made of material spun with his own hands. He wears "non-violent footwear" made from the leather obtained from cows that have died naturally. He makes excursions to remote villages where a cow or a calf was reported to be dying. When he secures the hide he soaks it in some solution before giving it to a cobbler for making his sandals. He brushes his teeth with a twig from the margosa tree because the nylon of the brush has an adverse effect on the enamel. He has given up salt, sugar, and rice and cooks for himself according to his theories. He has only a ten-watt bulb in his room because light rays should soothe the optic nerves and not stimulate them. He

believes that socks should not be worn because they heat the blood and because you insulate yourself against the magnetic charge of the earth surface. He has written about his life-giving theories in his book on Nature Cure and Natural Diet which is lying with Nataraj waiting to be printed. His wife refuses to associate herself with any of his life-giving activities. Even when she lies dying, he talks about Nature cure.

Some of the delightful comic episodes in Narayan's novels read like short stories, others like cartoons or comic strips. To give just one example: the switching on ceremony of the film "The Burning of Kama" at the Sunrise Theatre in *Mr Sampath*. At the appointed time the Pandits rise, light the camphor, and circle the flame before the gods, sounding a bell. Then they go to the camera and stick a string of jasmine and a dot of sandal paste on it. Then the president gives his speech. There is comedy in the sudden twist in the speech. He begins by criticizing the mythological and ancient subjects for movies; but when he is told that the movie that he is inaugurating also has a mythological subject, he begins to extoll the Indian epics as the store-house of wisdom. Narayan presents various shades of humour from gentle irony to parody. If his comedy has any purpose, it is the purpose of a cartoonist, i.e., not to let life become too solemn. Narayan's comic vision, which is his strength, also makes his art limited.

Documentary details of social and religious customs of India are given in his novels clearly with foreign audiences in mind. Sometimes such a description is too long and is not integrated well into the story. There is a perfect picture of the joint family in *Mr Sampath* where the elder *brother* of Srinivas provides for everyone. On the other hand, the joint family has broken down in *The Financial Expert*. Margayya's relations with his elder brother were quite warm till his marriage after which their wives could not get along. When their father died they got involved in litigation, divided the house and partitioned everything which he had left. Marriage is arranged after comparing horoscopes. In *The Bachelor of Arts* marriage cannot take place because the horoscopes do not match. There is a long flashback in Chapter 12 of *The Vendor of Sweets* when Jagan thinks of his own marriage. Narayan describes in detail the code which is observed when a

boy goes to see his would-be wife. Since he is not expected to show too much personal interest in his marriage, he depends on his younger sister who eavesdrops and brings news as the boy pretends to study. The demand for dowry, wedding feasts, and, later, visit to the temple of Santana Krishna to remedy barrenness are described at such length that the whole chapter seems to be intended for the special benefit of the foreign readers. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, rites connected with death are presented with a touch of comedy. There is a long description of an exorcist as he tries to cure Ravi of his madness in *Mr Sampath* and a short description as he cures Susila of typhoid in *The English Teacher*. Lakshmi Pooja and a pilgrimage to Tirupathi in *The Financial Expert* and religious procession in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* are described at great length. These pictures of traditional India have an exotic appeal for the western readers.

For the same reason, Narayan draws upon Indian myths and legends in his novels. Indeed they have become a part of his style. He makes use of the story of Shiva and Parvathi and the burning of Kama by Shiva's third eye in *Mr Sampath*, the cosmic dance of Shiva in *The Vendor of Sweets* and the stories of Savitri-Satyavan in *The English Teacher*, Santhanu in *The Painter of Signs* and Bhasmasura in *The Man-eater of Malgudi*. The exotic appeal of such stories for the American audience can be seen from the fact that when Harvey Breit and Patricia Rhinehart adopted *The Guide* for Broadway, they incorporated into the play the story of Santhanu and Ganga which is not there in the novel. It is only in *The Man-eater of Malgudi* that Narayan attempted to treat consciously a realistic story in terms of a myth. Vasu, who dominates life around destroys himself in the manner of Bhasamasura. No doubt, Narayan is commenting in this novel on the tyranny of the strong, the corruption of power, helplessness of the good when confronted by evil but the traditional Indian idea of evil destroying itself sounds too simplistic. He does not seem to understand the forces which underlie the making of a modern Rakshasha.

Narayan generally tends to be traditional in his vision of life. His art, therefore, does not show that exploratory quality which gives to a creative work depth and range. In most of his novels,

he sticks to the traditional Indian values of endurance, detachment, and withdrawal. *The Dark Room* presents the loveless marriage of Savitri with the tyrannical Ramani. When the husband refuses to give up his mistress, she tries to commit suicide, but is saved. Unable to live without children and without the security and comfort provided by the marriage, she comes back home. One can speculate how Hardy or Lawrence would have explored the theme of loveless marriage. Again, in *Mr Sampath*, Srinivas has been getting involved in the life of everyone around. Towards the end, however, Srinivas has a vision of history in which he sees the rise and fall of kingdoms and realizes that an individual does not count in the scheme of life. So he can take a detached view when his friend Ravi is beaten by the exorcist to drive out his madness. One gets the impression that the attitude of Srinivas is perhaps endorsed by the novelist. In Narayan's novels the tragic potentialities of a situation or a theme are never grasped. His characters never question the gods. *Punarjivan* (rebirth) either before death (as in the case of *The Vendor of Sweets*) or after death (as in the case of *The English Teacher*) comes handy as a solution to the muddles of this world, or to death itself.

To conclude, Narayan's peculiar genius as a comic entertainer has helped him win a large audience in the English-speaking world. This reading public, in turn, has not allowed him to venture out into other areas of human experience. He has got along prosperously with one little spot called Malgudi to the almost complete exclusion of any concern with socio-political forces at work in the country. What need has he to look at the vast panorama that India has been and is!

NOTES

- 1 "The Fiction Writer in India: His Tradition and His Problems," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 192 (October 1953), 120.
- 2 "To An Inquirer," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 84 (May 26, 1963), 33.
- 3 In an interview with V. Panduranga Rao, Narayan gave his sales figures till about the end of 1970: "Polish: five hundred thousand; Russian: two hundred thousand; middling in Italian, French, and Dutch; Hebrew: twenty thousand an edition; U.S. paperbacks: one hundred thousand each. Indian: on an average two thousand a month; one edition of

Lawley Road sold thirteen thousand; his own (Indian Thought) edition of *The Guide* sold fifty-five thousand; and the Hindi translation of the *The Guide* sold over thirty thousand" ("Tea With R. K. Narayan," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 6 [June 1971], 79).

- * "To An Inquirer," 33.
- † *New York Times Magazine*, 6 September 1959; 6 March 1955; and 30 May 1965.
- ‡ "Interview on the All India Radio, Calcutta," *Writers Workshop Miscellany*, 8 (1961), 50.
- § *The Vendor of Sweets* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1967), p. 117.