



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 8.4  
IJAR 2021; 7(11): 292-293  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 04-09-2021  
Accepted: 06-10-2021

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## Short stories of R. K. Narayan: A critical study

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### Abstract

R. K. Narayan is one of the greatest writers of Indian writings in English who has immense contribution for fiction. He has paved a new path in the case of short story writing by his fictitious Malgudy which is like the Wessex of Thomas Hardy. Naraya's character sketching is unique. He always selects characters from lower section of society who suffer due to their own actions and inactions which is the central themes of his writings.

**Keywords:** fiction, characterization, global status, Malgudy, Wessex, colonial society

### Introduction

Short story has its own plot which is totally different from other forms of literature. Since time immemorial story has been used as a medium of instruction for moral education. It is one of the best methods of imparting knowledge. Short story took a different shape in the colonial India. The European literature influenced the middle class India to write short stories in English language about the common man and common incidents. R K Narayan and his contemporaries started writing in English portraying the problems of their contemporary society with the aim of reforming it.

R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, collectively known as trio, in Indian Writings in English. They have immense contribution for English fiction which has given Indian Writings in English a global status. These writers cover the history of pre- independent and post-independent socio-political and cultural scenario of the struggling India through their writings. They wield pen to portray the multi-faceted problems of colonial and post-colonial India.

Narayan writes short stories just like an artist who goes on recording the events and incidents occur around him. Very often he is the part of his stories. His short stories deal with more on life than values because Narayan is a practical man who has experienced life suffering a lot. His better and bitter personal experience provides him the stuffs to compose fiction. When he writes short stories or novels he rarely philosophizes unlike Raja Rao or Manoj Das, but artistically portrays life of living and loving. His style of picking up subject matters for his stories is very unique as he always selects common man and common problems around him. Most of the characters of his short stories belong to Malgudy, a fictitious rural area slowly grows into town by the internal process of the economic development of the postcolonial India.

Narayan admits, "I enjoy writing short story. Unlike the novel, which emerges from relevant, minutely worked out detail, the short story can be brought into existence through a mere suggestion of detail, the focus being kept on a central idea of climax". (Malgudi Days, p viii, 1982) [2].

His novels are less artistic than his short stories. He takes fantasy and myths in his novels which emotionally force the readers to go through the plots. In his short stories the characters are real men and women of semi-urban areas who struggle hard to survive or succeed after a lot of trial tribulation. Sometimes they fail to achieve their goal in life even working hard which is the mystery of life. In this way Narayan is not a fatalist but fate plays a role in life which cannot be denied.

Narayan has written more than ninety short stories; most of them start from are the first person narrative. In most of his stories Narayan goes on describing the events and incidents relating to common man and that occurs everywhere in India. A reader can find his or her own reflection in Narayan's short stories which is his uniqueness.

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The technique of taking universal truth from a common incident and from a common man's life is really an artistic talent that is rarely seen.

Primarily Narayan wrote short stories with fixed words limit for the publication in *The Hindu* and his own short lived quarterly *Indian Thought*. The world limit could not hinder him portraying vast socio-cultural issues of his contemporary India employing irony. But William Walsh points out Narayan's follies in short stories meant for the publication in the newspapers which could not blossom properly due to lack of space. He deals with children, animal, ghosts, economic problems with ironical, pathetic or humorous situation. M.K.Naik analyses the ironic vision of Narayan in his *A Ironic Vision: A Study of the Fiction of R.K. Narayan* (1983) [4]. Naik has pointed out that irony is not only the central critical concept of his short stories but the touch stone in value judgments of his writings. Naik admits that "a persistent ironic note is, by and large, their distinguishing features" (4). He dwells on the verity of character which is yet "hardly matched by a corresponding thematic richness, because though all the characters are presented realistically, their dilemma, as their creator sees them, are hardly meaning full enough thematic terms and the author is mostly satisfied with the irony twist these petty dilemma provides. This makes for a general lack of social, political and even existential awareness and urgent emotional involvement in these short stories. (p 104)

Harish Raizada, a critic. Says, in his *R.K.Narayan: A Critical Study of his Works* (1969), that they are full of rich and sparkling entertainment and in them gaiety, fun, satire, amusement, pathos and excitement follow each other in the endless variety" (p 82). Narayan's short stories are humorous and satirical he satirizes the so called common characters for their uncommon follies.

Narayan deals with the middle man while Mulk Raj Anand portrays poverty both in his short stories and novels. Narayan's treatment of poverty is not as realistic as Anand because he was not haunted by poverty like Anand. His analysis of poverty is just like a second hand experience for which William Walsh says, poverty as "the air which most people [in the short stories] breathe"(97). Beyond ordinary poverty, Narayan in some cases even deals with life "conducted constantly on the edge of total disaster" (p 97).

His short stories confine within Malgudi, an imaginary place which is the microcosm of India. The Malgudian characters of his novels and short stories belong to India. The imaginary place the writer sketched in his writings is either Coimbatore or Malgudi as pointed out by the critics but it is a village gradually converted into a town. Malgudi's village flavour in *Swami and Friends* (1935) has already been declined in *The Tiger for Malgudi* (1985) by the advancement of town culture and its acceptability throughout India.

Narayan writes about India and Indians within the Hindu cults though he is secular writer. He is a rational Hindu and lampoons the superstitions in the Hinduism not as a social reformer but as an artist. His artistic comment on blind believes is very sarcastic and humorous.

Narayan criticizes the educated middle class who adopt dual standards in case of morality and on the social value system. The words and actions of the middle class family do not remain in the same parallel.

Narayan's has his own shortcomings in short stories. Three of Talkative Man Stories----- *The Snake Song*, *Old Man of*

*the Temple and Old Bones*—have to do with the mysterious supernatural, and bizarre. The analysis of ghosts and mysterious shadhus appeal the Indian readers so the writer takes care of selecting the theme of these elements in his stories but analyzes in an artistic vision. He does not deal with supernaturalism in his stories as Manoj Das does who only creates a mysterious and ghost-like appearance in his stories without their appearance.

In *The Snake Song*, the writer analyzes how music has a mysterious spell on the snake which is really both wonderful and realistic. Narayan could understand the psychology of his readers properly and writes accordingly.

Some critics like M. K. Naik are of the opinion that some of his short stories are like the short stories of Raja Rao who deals with only on the Hindu views of life. Raja Rao is a philosopher who looks at the things in the philosophic perspectives and his personal studies on the Indian philosophy

His short stories are time-proof as they deal with the truth of universal nature even though only encircling within India and its culture. Narayan tries his level best to enter into a character and incident while narrating or analyzing it and becomes successful. The bulk of his story is large but most of them are masterpieces. Time will pass but cannot ravish Narayan's work of art because of their interpretation of truth concerning human life and its nature.

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