

R. K. NARAYAN'S SHORT STORIES: A READING IN ORALITY

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Orality or folk which is always an alternative tradition in India has never been marginalized in India because it incarnates in it both traditional and modern characteristics. It may be located in power structures with a speaker exercising some authority over the listeners and this too can simply be reversed in the story telling in domestic environs. But it is the telling which is significant and the teller enjoys full freedom to impose his point of view and ideas. Orality seems to subsume a number of prose narrative forms, ranging from myths, fables to fairy tales. Each form of orality is differentiated from the other by its grounding either in the supernatural or in historical happenings, and they are about animals or narratives full of commonsensical edicts. The daily life of the Indians, the traditional beliefs of the land, the superstitions and values of Indian life which formed the core of the ancient story telling tradition of India earn a conspicuous place in Narayan's short stories. It is worth exploring how effectively Narayan could put orality within the tighter form of his short stories. The *Kathasaritsagar* and the two major epics in India are the ancestral resources for this narrative. Humour may occasionally be a tool in it. Orality is a tradition shared by Buddhism in the *Jataka Tales*, *Hitopadesa* and it is also found in the fables of the *Panchatantra*. The prose narratives, sometimes allegorical and didactic, imparting practical wisdom based on moral values, are the other side of orality. Orality has been masterly used by writers as widely different as Jorge Luis Borges and Githa Hariharan. As a writer R. K. Narayan's roots in orality can be traced back to his childhood memory of oral narration which he undoubtedly "absorbed from his grandmother and other old relatives" (Krishnan 1080). Narayan's *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* is a collection of short stories which may be called an exquisite quintessential representation of Narayan's use of orality, contributing functionally to the structure and texture of his stories.

Narayan said, "After all, for any short story writer, the prototype still inevitably remains to be our own epics and mythological stories" (Narayan 1970: 13). In his "Introduction" to *The Indian Epics Retold* Narayan said that he was impelled to retell *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* "because that was the great climate in which our culture developed. They are symbolic and philosophical. Even as stories they are so good. Marvellous. I couldn't help writing them. It was part of a writer's discipline" (Narayan 2000: xi). They are not just translations; they are the response of a highly creative mind to those cultural manifestations that have shaped the national psyche. Narayan's introduction to *Gods, Demons, and Others*, titled "The World of the Storyteller," is a reminiscing essay evoking the homely joys of the rural folk who flocked to the storyteller, a most learned man, to derive pleasure and peace from his retelling of the stories of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, demons and beasts. Narayan not only retold the two great Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, but also narrated some well-known incidents from Hindu mythology and folklore in *Gods, Demons, and Others*. For *The Mahabharata* and *Gods, Demons, and Others*, Narayan groped in the original Sanskrit versions. But as Narayan was ignorant of Sanskrit himself, he studied them with a pundit. For *Gods, Demons, and Others*, he had the pundit read out the original Sanskrit and explain it to him. Narayan said in "The World of the Storyteller," "My method has been to allow the original episodes to make their impact on my mind, as a writer, and rewrite them in my own terms, from recollection" (Narayan 1972: 388). This method is the fundamental of orality, telling a story from memory. Again, in keeping with the traditional method, "I have retained the narrator", Narayan said, "in the background, who occasionally comes forward with an explanation or an introduction" (Narayan 1972: 388).

According to Roland Barthes, a myth "is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes 109). In the 20th century modernist writers used myth as a trope in many contexts in their writings. Narayan draws on the ancient myths, lores and rituals, and revitalizes them to underscore their contemporary implication. Narayan himself observed that with "the impact of modern literature we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background" (Narayan 1979: 21). Myths and making vows on the mythical beliefs go hand in hand in common folk tradition among Indian people and Narayan, more often than not, gives it a deft humorous treatment. The first story in *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories*, "Nitya" is the story about a vow to God that Nitya's head would be shaved clean and his hair would be offered with due rites if his life was spared. When Nitya is a grown up college boy, his parents reach the temple with Nitya on a distant hill. But Nitya agrees to sacrifice only four inches of his hair. When nobody agrees to his proposal, Nitya grows angry and ultimately declines to give an inch of hair. Through the character of Nitya, the new generation representative, Narayan raises some satirical questions against the so-called religious vow-making. In another story "A Snake in the Grass" a snake has reportedly got into the compound. People there were to search it out with every available knife and crowbar and began to hack the garden. A beggar happens to reach there and takes stock of the sentiment, saying that it was surely not snake but God Subramanya who has come to visit them in the family. And, mother was in hearty agreement: "You are right. I forgot all about the promised Abhishekam. This is a reminder" (94).

The oral story telling tradition of India may be felt in the Talkative Man stories. The Talkative Man starts a story like an ancient village story-teller with listeners or audience around him. Narayan's "Under the Banyan Tree" is the story of Nambi the story-teller of the village Somal, who could make up a story, in his head:

On the nights he had a story to tell he lit a small lamp and placed it in a niche in the trunk of the banyan tree. Villagers as they returned home in the evening saw this, went home, and said to their wives, "Now, now, hurry up with the dinner, the story-teller is calling us." (188)

We get a glimpse of the ancient village atmosphere: "He hardly ever had to go out in search of company; for the banyan shade served as a clubhouse for the village folk" (188). He never repeats the same story, and the villagers consider him to be a sort of miracle. But the time came when he saw himself failure to complete a story: "And then...and then...what happened?" The ultimate realization of Nambi is an observation on his own situation in particular and the erosion of the village tradition in general:

...Nambi is a dotard....But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone? Goddess be thankedThese are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story. (191)

Narayan's 'The Talkative Man' in stories like "Old Man of the Temple," "A Career" and "The Roman Image" etc. is none but the modern version of the "narrator" technique of ancient Indian tradition. His "A Career" begins thus: "The Talkative Man said: Years and years ago I had a ship. It was in those days when Lawley Extension was not what it is now" (43). The stories are, like those of the *Kathasaritsagara*, framed in time, such as "Once upon a time", "One day" and "Long time ago". The generic name, the Talkative Man, confers upon him the stamp of a universal type:

...The fact that Narayan gives him only a generic rather than a specific name suggests that he conceives him mainly as a typical character. In him Narayan has created and immortalized universal type, familiar particularly to any unhurried and leisurely society, rural and suburban, in which there are people eager to listen to tales and anecdotes and therefore there are tellers of tales. In such a world and such a set up the kind of stories the Talkative Man tells can be told and listened to. He could be regarded as a South-Indian version of a universal type. Both the narrator and his listeners belong to a long established oral tradition of story-telling, which is still alive in our country. (Jayantha 174)

The allegorical garb of *Panchatantra* stories— of observing the human world through the animal one— has a strong resonance on some great short story writers in English. The beginning of Narayan's short story "Chippy" has the traditional ambience of oral story telling, as if the story-teller is before his listeners and starting a story to tell, as if it is a live presentation: "I cannot give a very clear account of Chippy's early life. All that I am in a position to say is that he was born in London,..."(77). The story is an animal story and Chippy is the name of a pet-dog who was leading a very "happy and contented life." He feels envious of the new entrant, another dog, in the house, who starts sharing the privilege that was solely his due. He trots away from his master's house in despair and luckily discovers a lane that could satisfy his hunger pleasantly. He takes the decision to spend the rest of his life there, far away from his master's house. But after a week or so, he hungers for his master's company. One morning he comes back and his master drags him to the garden and washes him rubbing a bit of soap on his back. Swami, his master, tells him, "I am sure you will be miserable to hear this: your little friend is gone...Don't worry: I'll get you another companion soon" (81). What an irony! Chippy is an allegorical representation of some characteristics of the human world. Just as Swami could not sense the gestures or language of Chippy, we fail to sense the thoughts and feelings of our fellow beings.

Folklore and fairy tales plough freely on the imagination and depend for their appeal on the wonderful, the impossible, the never-never-land. Narayan's creation of the fictional town, Malgudi, has evolved as a part of modern Indian folklore. In his "Author's Introduction" to *Malgudi Days*, Narayan says, "Where is Malgudi? All I can say is that it is imaginary and not to be found in any map... If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics of Malgudi seem to me universal" (Narayan 1943: viii). In fact, Malgudi is a locale of the mind in the fictional world of Narayan. The hoary story telling tradition of India used fantasy, the device which allow writers to have superb flights of imagination. Narayan's use of fantasy in his short stories is a means to expose the Indian reality, the beliefs, attitudes, superstitions or the fine simple feelings of people living in Indian villages. Narayan's animal stories with the Talkative Man as the narrator seem to create an atmosphere of fantasy, a world of mystery and wonder which consists of things wonderful, unheard of and unimaginable. The utopian, imaginative world or "inner reality," to use a phrase of Wole Soyinka, is a world made up of demons, beasts, lores, myths and its own systems of belief and justice. The nature of the 'inner world in a cohesive society', as Soyinka observes, "is the essentialisation of a rational world-view, one which is elicited from the reality of social and natural experience and from the integrated reality of racial myths into a living morality" (Soyinka 34).

Referring to Sanskrit literature Narayan observes that traditional literature and style inevitably become a background for a writer's own efforts, even if the writer generally writes of a modern sociology with recognizable characters and characteristics. In fact, in its narration, orality is audience-geared with the listener interfering with inquisitiveness or an admission, or an expression of awe and wonder. Although Ferdinand de Saussure used the linkages between the signifier and the signified by using the words "langue" and "parole" to differentiate between speech and its use, language is much

more than mere two different modes such as speech and writing, as it incorporates the total knowledge system and religious discourse and it is anchored in its time and environmental surroundings. Like Valmiki who is a narrator as well as one of the characters in the narrative of the *Ramayana*, the Talkative Man in Narayan's short stories is a participant in the action of the story with the listeners in the puranic tradition. C.V. Venugopal even finds a prototype for the Talkative Man in the Bodhi Sattva of the *Jataka Tales*. The listener is present in Narayan's short stories even in a more concrete manner where orality is concerned. The ending is often temporary with its multiple embeddings which may open out other course of events. In his short stories Narayan has drawn sustenance from tradition and he has modified it with his individual talent bringing to bear on it the modern perception of life.

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