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## R. K. Narayan: The *Bricoleur*

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### Abstract

In the light of the evident schismaticalness and truncatedness of the extant rhetorical studies on R. K. Narayan's fiction, the principal aim of this rhetorical study is to prove that R. K. Narayan is principally a *bricoleur* having immaculate command over narratology, narrative grammar and narrative as rhetoric. It is hypothesized that R. K. Narayan who has characterized himself as "an inattentive quick writer who has little sense of style" (Meheta, 57) is an "instinctive unstudied writer" (Naipaul, 41) having a robust "sense of audience" (Ahluwalia, 59), much like that of the Indian traditional fabulators, storytellers, and *bhagavatars*. Illustrative material in defense of the thesis of this paper is to be drawn from "Old and New." This paper adopts the methodology of excursive library studies involving Narratology, rhetoric, R. K. Narayan's polyvalent works, essays, short stories, Diary, and autobiography.

**Keywords:** *Bricoleur*, narratology, rhetoric, illustration, R. K. Narayan

### Introduction

R. K. Narayan, the *fleur immortelle* (immortal flower) /the crest-gem of Indian fiction in English, is qualified by "a norm of excellence below which he cannot possibly lower himself" (Iyengar, 359). So, the R. K. Narayan canon remains, though many changes and pass. That is why, R. K. Narayan literature is immensely vulnerable to what Frederick Campbell Crews calls the pooh perplex. The existence of a large amount of commentary on his polysemous and polyvalent fiction bears ample testimony to the fact that "it is a writer's merits that make the criticism on him rewarding" (Frye, 555). Yet Narayan criticism, in spite of its plurisignifications, does not match the unity, harmony, and radiance (*integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*) of the R. K. Narayan *oeuvre*. It is so because most of the R. K. Narayan scholars have failed to demystify the *nous* of the R. K. Narayan canon. So, Narayan scholarship is "heavily encrusted with the deposits of previous readings and misreadings" (Lodge, 90). Hence to bring out the distinctive and immercescible (white) radiance of R. K. Narayan's polysemous works, critics, while being conscious of what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls "the history of influence or effect (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*)" (Collier, 59), should avoid what Derrida has called "paleonymics" (Culler, 140). Put simply, while being *revisionists*, retaining "old names while grafting new meaning upon them" (Culler, 140), they should come away from the comfort zone of paralipsis to do what Sheldon Sacks, R. Rader, James Phelan, and F. J. Antczak have done to carry forward, modify, and revalorize the rhetorical reading of fiction by Wayne Booth, Austin Wright, David Lodge, and Richard McKeon. Despite the polysemic and polyvocality of Narayan scholarship from the days of what Amartya Sen has called "exoticist", "magisterial" and "curatorial" approaches to his works, rhetoric of R. K. Narayan's fiction has been studied perfunctorily. Though most of the fictional narratives of Narayan possess "an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive, under endlessly varying dispositions" (Kermode, 40), rhetorical studies of Narayan's fictional narratives have remained mostly schismatical and tangential, despite the evident hyperverbality of Narayan's "persuasive prose" (Frye, 265) and its limpid style.

Undeterred by "anxiety of influence" (Bloom, 1975), in 1960s, a host of critics, in India resorted to rhetorical criticism. Among the Indian rhetorical critics of fiction, Biyatkesh Tripathy, who studied major novels of D. H. Lawrence from the perspective of technique and attitude, Amitabha Sinha, and S. M. Sinha are putatively renowned. When B. K. Tripathy was attempting rhetorical study of D. H. Lawrence's technique, Meenakshi Mukherjee was attempting rhetorical study of the themes and techniques of Indo-Anglian fiction (from 1930 to 1964).

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That is why, Meenakshi Mukherjee is the doyenne among the Indian critics (engaged in rhetorical studies of R. K. Narayan's fictional and non-fictional narratives), such as K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, P. S. Sundaram, V. Y. Kantak, Nirmal Mukherjee, R. A. Nasimi, Krishna Sharma, William Walsh, N. N. Sharan, G.D. Mishra, J. K. Biswal, S. P. Rath, M. Shivaram Krishna, Sumitra Misra, K. Garebian, Rajesh K. Pallan, *et al.* If Iyengar, Sundaram, Saran, Biswal, S. P. Rath and Srinath have made tangential studies of R. K. Narayan's "dialogic narrative", "style", "techniques", and "narrative strategies", W. Walsh (1982), Fakrul Alam (1994), Sita Kapadia (1994), Anil Doditch (2006), P. S. Ramana (2006), Rajesh K. Pallan (2006), and have affected segmental/componential rhetorical studies of "narrative strategies", "style", "language", "design", "myth and symbol", "voice", and "art" of Narayan's novels respectively. So, no holistic study of the rhetoric of R. K. Narayan's fiction is still available from the perspectives of the postmodern "politics of interpretation" of "narrative as rhetoric".

Though Iyengar feels that R. K. Narayan wields so difficult and alien a language like English with masterful ease, so adroitly that not a word is wasted and not a word rings false, he has made no attempt to study the rhetoric of Narayan's fiction. Similarly for Sharan, Narayan attends to his craft very seriously and so has superb mastery over the craft of novel but he has relegated his study of Narayan's style and technique just into the last chapter of his "A critical study of the novels of R. K. Narayan". Obviously his is not a full-fledged rhetorical study of Narayan's fiction. Though J. K. Biswal has showed obvious interest in Narayan's authorial silence, unobtrusive style, honest recording of facts, style and vision, digressional techniques, and rhetorical modes his doctoral dissertation, his is a truncated study and the lopsidedness of his study is manifested in the way he has cramped his rhetorical analysis of Narayan's "style and vision" into the last chapter of his talismanic work "A critical study of the novels of R. K. Narayan". This kind of half-hearted and bucketshot rhetorical study is a common feature in most of the so-called critical studies made by hard-core loyalists of Narayan, like S. Xavier Alphonso, K. Venkata Reddy, A. Ramakrishna Rao, P. Bayapa Reddy, C. R. Visweswara Rao, Narendra Kumar, Z. N. Patil, A. Hariprasanna, D. S. Dewari, Ramesh Dinyate, R. K. Dhawan, S. K. Dhamija, Cynthia Vanden, Driesen and C. N. Srinath. For Srinath, Narayan, as a storyteller, is in the tradition of the *Bhagavatar*. Obviously, he is at critical loggerhead with William Walsh for whom Narayan, simply the novelist as novelist, moulds Eastern materials with the help of "Western techniques" into readable texts. Though K. R. Srinivas Iyengar has felt that Narayan is a master craftsman of fiction.

Reiterated problems such as characterization, thematics, liminality, oppositional aesthetics, politics of conflict/dissent, identity, selfhood/self-wholeness, rift/drift between East and West, womanhood, theodicy, and generic (trans.) mutations shall not come within the ambit of this rhetorical study. However as and when critical exigency crops up, appropriate *inter alia* studies and references shall be made *en passant* to beef up the defence of the theses beyond any cavil.

"Old and New" (1981) is an anthology of short stories written by R K Narayan. In these short stories Narayan has used a melange of-story-telling techniques, materials of

assorted nature like a *bricoleur* and rhetorical flourish. To lend focus to the analysis, *Emden*, the first story in this volume of short stories is rhetorically studied (in depth).

In the story, *Emden*, R K Narayan has used the technique of the third person narrative. So, in the first sentence the pronoun "he" is embossed. No doubt, the narrator, has very soon identified the oldest man in town, Rao. Among the 75 descendants and acquaintances like the photographer, Jayaraj Rao, all are not glib – tongue narrators. Even Rao has been given a speech only towards the end of the first page of the story "Emden." Seems to me rather a device to pack off an old man quickly.....(1). Even in his birthday bash, he has been taciturn.

Even in his birthday bash, he has been taciturn. No wonder, he is something between eighty and ninety years of age. Dimming of his faculties has definitely told upon his speech-making abilities. So, he has ceased from making comments and from raising questions. He has felt that names are the greatest impediments to speech. R.K. Narayan's politicians and war -mongers speak in the same manner without indicating any adverse effect of old age in their ability to make windy speeches.

Rao has no doubt, lost his loquacity but his ability to think deeply and to take stock of things around him, around his home and around his habitat. So, he has conducted himself like a *bricoleur*, taking stock of the odd things at hand and collaring them into a veritable product attesting his creativity. And it is so simply because R.K. Narayan, the writer is himself a *bricoleur*. He has had the knack of giving importance to so-called ordinary things around him, around the orbits – circles of his observation. So, the collages made by Narayan are more suggestive. So, R.K. Narayan, the *bricoleur*, has made the group photograph (in two parts) taken on the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Emden, Emden's children and grandchildren (mostly nameless for the "grandmaster"), specific features of "Vinayale Street", "Kabir Street" (2), Rao's activities in his retirement and sartorial choices *et al* more prominent.

Despite the loquacity of the 3rd person narrator – tabulator, the embedded speeches of the crowd – cardboard characters like the photographer, the un-named well-wisher of Emden, the owner of the Chettiar's, and Jayaraj have made the tongue-in-cheek articulations made by the old protagonist. In this context, the question who is he? leads heavy support and weight to the rhetoricity of this short story. As this question is pin-pointed, its answering sequel, "We used to call him Emden" is equally succinct and pithy. Then the *bricoleur* in R.K. Narayan has impeached the narrator of the story. And all sorts of tidebits regarding the persona of Emden are box-packaged in a space of only 50 (FIFTY) lines.

In this Homeric narration, one finds a cluster of six questions. And most of these questions are open-ended questions, hence with loaded problem pathological incisiveness. Some of such problem astrological questions are:

- What are you doing headmaster? (6)
- Is this the way you train them? (6)
- Or do you want to turn out gutter-snipes? (6)
- Why don't you keep an eye on them? (6)

As it is obvious, each question mentioned above does not entail a summative reply and any possible answer,

marshalled by the fabulator, engenders a host of questions. So in the lines to follow, one finds another flurry of exclamations, to be specific five exclamatory responses in quick succession. Hence the formula of R.K. Narayan's narrativization seems to be declarative sentences → Questions → Replies ----- Questions/Exclamations ("DSQRQ"). That is why, not only Jayaraj's tongue has "wagged" but also others have.

That is why, the third-person narrator has not taken any long pause. With clarity and energy (8), he has waxed eloquent in service of moralizing and philosophy (8). At this juncture, Narayan, the *bricoleur*, has taken over the baton of muted narration. So, he has made an inventory of the things and articles Emden has kept in the cupboard. In the process, the *bricoleur* has also rummaged the diary maintained by Emden. Hence the narration veers about giving local shapes and attitudes to girls/ladies like "DG, &" "S..." "and girls with "names," "elusive anyway". Yet the bricolage is not done. Gradually, the bricolage has put the narratological microphone on the "Chettiar stores, Mani's great grandmother", "Jagan, Jagan's Sweets", the children playing around the sweet stall and the sweet stacked on shelves like "jilebi"). Despite all these narratological sprees, the short story under study ends with a hybridized statement, hybridized because of its interrogative frame intoning and exclamation while suggesting a string of responses: "who knows, S... is perhaps in this incarnation now"; Thus, on the basis of the rhetorical analysis of the story "Emden" it is concluded that,

- R.K. Narayan is a *bricoleur* so far as structuration of the short stories written by him is considered,
- He has the knack of holding the attention of readers,
- And that is why, he has been a rhetor. Furthermore, it is inferred that he has some sort of reference and weakness towards the third-person narrator. Yet he has not made the so-called omniscient narrator and oracle-maker with a microphone hidden in the soundbox in his throat. So, R.K. Narayan has mostly used the narratological formula Declarative Sentence → Questions → Replies (either declarative or exclamatory → Questions). That is why, it is prudent to conclude that R.K. Narayan is not a theorem-maker in his works of narration but is a problematologist in the mould of Michel Meyer.

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