



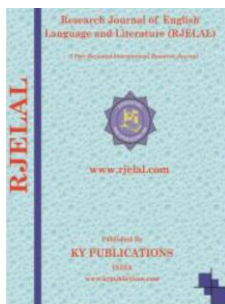
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NARAYAN'S ART OF STORY TELLING

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ABSTRACT

The Doctor's Word is told by an omniscient author whose centre of consciousness is Doctor Raman. It is a story of friendship between Dr. Raman and Gopal, "a classic friendship standing over, untouched by changing times, circumstances, and activities.

Missing Mail is a story of a character in simplicity of a postman, Thanappa, who gets "mixed up with the fortunes of the persons to whom he was carrying letters."

"The Missing Mail" presents the difficulties of a middle class family, in performing the marriage of a girl. The Martyr's Corner is one of the most remarkable stories of Narayan. He has made use of dramatic irony in this story.

It is a story of a street vendor, he managed his business by bribing ...

Rama had to shift to some other place which was inconvenient to his customers.

Really speaking, Rama is a martyr who is reduced to penury for no fault of his own.

In "Forty Five a Month", Narayan described the drudgery of a clerk Venkat Rao who almost sacrificed his personal life for the sake of the office work.

Venkat Rao, exasperated by the attitude of his boss, decided to resign from the job, he could not do so because of the sudden sanction of an increment of five rupees by his officer. "All Avoidable Talk" is another remarkable story in which Narayan describes the insults experienced by a petty clerk in a jewellery shop.

Having decided to extract an apology from his master, Sastri went straight to his master's bungalow.

The boss thought that Sastri came to apologise for his behaviour in the shop.

The master told him that he forgave him as it was his principle to forgive anyone who sincerely repented.

This is another ironical twist in the story. Sastri, who went to his master's house to extract an apology, he, himself had to apologise to the master.

"Out of Business" is another story which deals with the problem of unemployment. Having lost his business Rama Rao searched for a job to feed his family but failed to get employment.

In "A Hero" Swami the protagonist of "Swami and His friends" once again appears along with his fond granny, sympathetic mother and severe father.

Luckily he became a hero. The honour was thrust on him. He was a coward through and through.

Telling of a story by the author himself is as old as the genre of story itself. Most of Narayan's short stories are written in this manner.

They are told by the author himself. This device helps him in establishing direct rapport between the teller and the reader.

The Doctor's Word:

It is told by an omniscient author whose centre of consciousness is Doctor Raman. It is a story of friendship between Dr. Raman and Gopal, "a classic friendship standing over, untouched by changing times, circumstances, and activities.

"One day Gopal's son informs him of his father's illness and asks him to visit his place".

Dr. Raman was thought to be the last person to be consulted because, "Long years of practice of this kind had bred in the doctor a certain curt truthfulness; for that very reason his opinion was valued; he was not a mere doctor expressing an opinion but a judge pronouncing a verdict.

The patient's life hung on his words.

Dr. Raman never believed that "agreeable words ever saved lives. He did not think that it was any of his business to provide unnecessary dope when as a matter of fact Nature would tell them the truth in a few hours.

"However, when he glimpsed the faintest sign of hope, he rolled up his sleeves and stepped into the arena; it might be hours or days, but he never withdrew till he wrested the prize from Yama's hands.

But this surprising belief "the agreeable words save life", come true at least in his friend's case.

It was a mystery to Dr. Raman who was surprised at his recovery.

"How he was survived this attack will be a puzzle to me all my life," replied the doctor.

The patient clutched the doctor's wrist with his weak flaggers and said, "Ramu, it is my good fortune that you are here at this moment.

I trust your word—I can't leave my property unsettled. That will mean endless misery for my wife and children.

You know all about Subbiah and his gang. Let me sign it before it is too late. Tell me...."

Dr. Raman sat engrossed in thinking about his friend. If he asked him to sign the will, which would virtually mean a death sentence and destroy the thousandth part of a chance that the patient had of survival.

At last he came to a decision "If my word can save his life, he shall not die. The will be damned."

And the miracle took place. Gopal awoke next morning and looked very well.

The objectivity lies in not directing his omniscience to dictate the thoughts and feelings of other characters.

The reader's interest is heightened all the while in an ascending degree which reaches crescendo when Dr. Raman pronounces the verdict that "Don't worry about the will now. You are going to live. Your heart is absolutely sound."

The title of the story gives the reader the clue of the story and forces him to be on the lookout for doctor's word which does the miracle.

The reader's interest is captivated by narration. Narayan has achieved unity of effect by judicious use of words. Not a single word in the story is dispensable.

Missing Mail

Missing Mail is a story of a character in simplicity of a postman, Thanappa, who gets "mixed up with the fortunes of the persons to whom he was carrying letters."

He was "a part and parcel of their existence, their hopes and aspirations, and activities.

One of such attachments is Kamakshi, the young and beautiful daughter of Ramanujam, a senior clerk in Revenue Division Office. Several years ago he delivered a letter to her anxious father informing him of her birth:

Give me a handful of Sugar before I give you this card. Happy father! After all these years of prayers! Don't complain that it is a daughter. Daughters are God's gift, you know... Kamakshi- lovely name."

And now as she grows into a young damsel, he gets as much worried about her marriage as her own father.

He is happy when he learns that Kamakshi's marriage is settled." Thanappa placed himself at Ramanujam's service during all his off hours. He cut short his eloquence, advices and exchanges in other houses."

When he was asked, "what is the matter with you? In such a hurry!", "Yes, leave me alone till the twentieth of May I will come and squat in your house after that--."

But there was a lurking fear in the mind of Ramanujam. "It is not the very last date for the year. If for some reason some obstruction comes up, it is all finished for ever.

The boy goes away for three years. I don't think either of us would be prepared to bind ourselves to wait for three years."

And the foreboding of Ramanujam comes true. Ramanujam was informed of the illness of his uncle, his father's brother, who was in Salem. But Thanappa having known its repercussions does not deliver the letter till the marriage is over. A telegram followed the letter on 20th May, the marriage day but that too he did not deliver.

After the bridal party has left, one day he delivers the letter to Ramanujam who was very much grieved to learn of his uncle's illness. Thanappa then handed over the telegram which announced the uncle's death.

Ramanujam sat down on the trial, unable to stand the shock. After regaining courage Ramanujam turned to go in. Thanappa had a confession to make and requested him, "One moment, sir, I have a confession to make. See the date on the card."

"May the nineteenth, nearly fifteen days ago!"

'Yes, Sir and the telegram followed next day – that is, on the day of the marriage. I was unhappy to see

it... But what has happened has happened. I said to myself, and kept it away, fearing that it might interfere with the wedding... You can complain if you like, Sir. They will dismiss me. It is a serious offence."

The reader follows the narrator closely. Readers's attention is not directed from the main narrative though there are a few digressions when Thanappa chats with other people. These digressions, however, only help bring out the main narrative vividly.

"The Missing Mail" presents the difficulties of a middle class family, in performing the marriage of a girl.

While reading this story, we come to know about the various difficulties faced by the contemporary middle class families, when they plan to perform the marriages of their girls.

In this story we come across a warm hearted, lovable, pleasing and polite character in Thanappa, the old postman, who gets personally involved in the affairs of the people, and who shares the joys and sorrows of the people to whom he delivers letters.

The Martyr's Corner:

This is one of the most remarkable stories of Narayan. He has made use of dramatic irony in this story.

It is a story of a street vendor, a common figure, found on Indian streets, did his business briskly "at that turning between Market Road and the lane leading to the chemist's shop

He managed his business by bribing "an occasional packet of his stuff to the traffic constable going off duty, or to the health department menial who might pass this way."

One day, as usual, when he was about to set his business there broke up a riot, the reason being a private quarrel – "within an hour the whole scene looked like a battle field."

Of course, police came on to the spot presently, but they had a three fold duty on "maintaining law and order and also maintaining themselves intact and

protecting some party whom they believed to be injured.”

When the cinema house emptied itself the crowd became unmanageable.

The police had to resort to lathi and tear gas and finally open fire.

Many people died “but the official communique maintained that only five were injured and a four and a quarter killed in the police firin.

The normalcy returned after ten days when the papers clamoured for a full public inquiry. Rama watched the unfolding of the contemporary history through papers and was shocked when one day he was driven out of the place by two young men bearing badges who informed him that the place has been cardoned off for erecting a monument.

Rama had to shift to some other place which was inconvenient to his customers and consequentially his business fell off and at last had to go to Kohinoor Restaurant for a job at twenty rupees a month for eight hours a day.

The story ends with an ironic note when Rama asks people who frown at him, “Gently brother, I was once a hotel owner myself” and requests them to behave properly.

The story has a strong under current of irony. The title itself is felt explanatory. It is left to the ironic sense of the perceiver whom to call a martyr. P.D. Westbrook rightly says “who is a real martyr? The brawler, to whom the statue is erected or Rama who is reduced to penury?”

Really speaking, Rama is a martyr who is reduced to penury for no fault of his own.

Forty Five a Month

In “Forty Five a Month”, Narayan described the drudgery of a clerk Venkat Rao who almost sacrificed his personal life for the sake of the office work.

He had sold himself “body and soul” for just forty rupees a month.

He was virtually imprisoned in the office everyday till nine O’ clock in the night.

He became so furious because he could not take his little daughter Shanta to the cinema, as he promised her.

Venkat Rao is a cog in the societal machine and has to lead his life mechanically. Though Venkat Rao, exasperated by the attitude of his boss, decided to resign from the job, he could not do so because of the sudden sanction of an increment of five rupees by his officer.

So again he was flung back into the social order much against his will. He thought he was bogged down upto the neck in the quagmire of slavery. The story ends on a sad note with this realisation:

I don’t know if it is going to be possible for me to take her out at all – you see they are giving me an increment.” he wailed

One day when Venkat Rao was about to leave for his office, a jut-ka came to that street and distributed cinema pamphlets. His little daughter who was very much fascinated by the hand bill, asked her father to take her to the cinema.

He felt very sorry for having been neglecting his wife and his daughter.

At least his wife has her own friends circle.

But the child’s life has become miserable, dully, dry, drag and morose. He could not give any attention to her.

By the time he returned from the office, she slept.

He felt very angry with his officer. That day he resolved to disobey his manager and come out of the office at five O’ clock, and take his child to the cinema.

He wanted to free himself from the tentacles of the slavery of the office work, and attend on his little daughter. Even on Sundays the officer wanted his work. He thought to himself:

“Why did they think he had no personal life, a life of his own? They gave him hardly any time to take the child to the park or the picture.”

But that day as he resolved to come out of the office at five O’ clock, he promised his daughter to take

her to the cinema. He asked her to be ready at five O' Clock by the time he returned from the office.

Shanta who felt elated with the promise, jumped with joy.

At the school, Shanta was waiting impatiently for the clock to strike five, because she must get herself ready for the cinema.

She applied powder on her face and pressed a vermilion mark on her forehead. Thus having got ready, she was eagerly waiting for the arrival of her father.

She hung on to the gate. Time was marching on. But there was no trace of her father at the bend of the street. She made a vain attempt to locate his office and came back home. The disappointment of the girl squeezes the hearts of the readers.

There at the office Venkat Rao did his office work during the day, and at five O' Clock asked his boss to allow him to go home as he had an urgent private business.

But the boss was a hard task mater. He was not a person to allow the clerks to go home even after five O' Clock. Because he himself came to the office three hours ahead of the scheduled office time, and stayed in the office three hours after the closure of the office timings.

The life of Venkat Rao reminds us of the life of scores of such small time clerks, who just drag their lives to eke out their livelihood, without having even simple pleasures of life. Even going to a cinema is a luxury for them.

Venkat Rao hardly took his daughter to cinema twice in her life time.

As usual that day also Venkat Rao's boss did not allow him to stir out of the office until the given work was over. He told Venkat Rao curtly:

"There should not be anything more urgent than the office work: go back to the seat."

The Manager was a tyrant who did not care for other people's problems. Venkat Rao was angry with the manager, because it was he who was indirectly responsible for his daughter's suffering and loneliness.

Venkat Rao visualised Shanta standing at the gate, dressed and waiting for him eagerly and anxiously.

"Venkat Rao was furious. His mind was made up. He was not a slave who had himself for forty rupees outright. He could make that money easily; and if he could not it would be more honourable to die of starvation".

Throughout the story we find a constant attempt on the part of Venkat Rao to rebel against the boss, and free himself from the drudgery, but in vain.

Venkat Rao is the representative of the lower middle class people who lead a miserable life.

At last Venkat Rao had written a resignation letter in which he accused the management of having bought him for 40 rupees a month without any increment. He took the resignation letter and handed it over to the manager.

The manager, who received the cover mechanically, put the cover on the table, and told Venkat Rao that he recommended Venkat Rao's name for an increment.

At this Venkat Rao was surprised, and snatched the resignation letter which was on the table. He went back to his seat and resumed his work.

His increment was only five rupees. Anyhow, he could not keep his promise of taking his daughter to the cinema.

At nine O' Clock he returned home by which time Shanta had already slept. Her mother said,

"She wouldn't even change her frock thinking that any moment you might be coming and taking her out.

The psychological torture of Venkat Rao is portrayed well in this story. Apart from showing the difficulties of the lower middle class people, the story also depicts the child psychology well.

All Avoidable Talk

"All Avoidable Talk" is another remarkable story in which Narayan describes the insults experienced by a petty clerk in a jewellery shop.

Like Venkat Rao in "Forty Five a Month" "Sastri in "All Avoidable Talk" also faces rough treatment in

the hands of his employer. Like Venkat Rao Sastri also makes an attempt to preserve his self respect.

His plan to rebel against his employer is fizzled out.

Being a member of the deprived class, he also failed to rise to the occasion like Venkat Rao.

“All Avoidable Talk” describes the superstitious beliefs of an average man, a clerk Sastri who is told by an astrologer friend to avoid all avoidable talk on Monday, because, as the stars and planets tell, any slight remark by him may provoke others to quarrel with him.

Sastri decided to be silent on that day, because his previous experiences showed that most of his friend’s prophesies came true.

Once, his friend prophesied that Saturn would cause minor ailments at home. And everyone in the household caught cold and fever.

He himself was attacked by cold and fever but was not allowed by his employer to take rest.

“He himself felt like taking to bed, but his jeweller Chief would not let him go”

This shows that an average lower middle class man cannot even take rest, even when he is ill.

Unless he works every day, he cannot feed himself and his family. Any slight hint of an impending difficulty would frighten such people to death.

It is for that reason that they take re-course to astrology and other such things. So when his astrologer friend told him,

“I see your worst period is coming to an end, but avoid all, avoidable talk tomorrow – the whole of Monday. There is always the danger of your irritating others and finding other irritating”⁴⁶

Sastri decided to be silent on Monday. He just wanted to give his answers in a short form, in a telegraphic language, in a curt ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.

That’s why when his daughter entered into the bathroom, and locked herself inside at the office time, he did not pick up a quarrel with her as usual. He completed his bathing outside and silently took his lunch and went to catch the tram.

In this story Narayan vividly described the problems faced by an average office goer and how he should work like a bonded labourer continuously, without rest, the whole day.

The only difference between a drudge and a petty clerk like Sastri is that, while a drudge is a slave in the hands of his master, petty clerk is a slave of the social order from which there is no escape for him.

A slave’s freedom is not in his hands, though a petty clerk’s freedom is in his hands, he cannot achieve it. Thus, the line of difference between the two is very thin.

Again Sastri’s difficulties started in the tram.

“The tram was crowded as usual. Somebody stood on his toes. He bore patiently. The tram conductor pushed him aside and uttered rude remarks, for standing in the way. He kept quiet”⁴⁷ Going to the office by a bus or a tram is a trial for an office goer everyday.

As soon as Sastri entered the office, a series of insults were inflicted on him right from the morning till the evening.

These insults shed lights on the pitiable life of the people who are trapped in the wage slavery. The employer derives a sadistic pleasure in inflicting insults on such petty people. They do it to satisfy their ego, and assert their authority.

“At the office he was only two minutes late, but his employer, already seated on his cushion, glared at him and behaved as if he had been two hours late....

“You stand there like a statue, saying nothing, it must be very convenient, I suppose...”

This shows the attitude of the employers towards the small time employees.

When Sastri was seeing his accounts, a customer came in and showed a trinket and asked him whether the diamond could be removed from it, and reset in platinum.

When Sastri said that he did not know about it, the angry customer reported the matter to the proprietor.

The proprietor immediately called Sastri to the counter. Sastri could not go to the counter

immediately because, if he moved from the account, he would lose the link. So, after two minutes he went to the proprietor. Before that his master expressed his wrath.

“Drop the pen and come here when I call, will you”. Sastri saw a paper weight in the hands of the master, and felt insulted. He thought perhaps the master wanted to fling it at him. The presence of the customer added fuel to the fire. He was overwhelmed with resentment.

He thought to himself. “He pays me fifty rupees not for nothing, I am slave for him. What right has he to insult me.....” Thus Sastri’s heart bled with insult.

Narayan’s portrayal of the delicate feelings of Sastri is remarkable, moving and realistic.

There is an element of irony here. Sastry wanted to be silent in order to escape from insults on that day. Ironically the same silence brought a chain of insults on him.

It is because of this irritating silence that the customers complained against Sastri. It is because of the same silence that the proprietor shouted at him even for small reasons.

After receiving scoldings from his master, Sastri worked till late in the night and came out of office at nine O’ Clock.

Walking on the road he thought to himself,

“I have been called names. I have been insulted by strangers and by my officer, before every one. Platinum! Platinum! I have served for twenty years for less than fifty rupees a month.... He wondered why he had become so degenerate as not to be able to earn this anywhere else”

Having decided to extract an apology from his master, Sastri went straight to his master’s bungalow.

But when, once in the bungalow, he did not have the guts to ask for any apology from his employer.

The boss thought that Sastri came to apologise for his behaviour in the shop.

We find a surprise at the end of the story, when the master told Sastri that the man who enquired about platinum was a mad man. It is for that reason that

the master gripped a paper weight in his hand. The master ordered Sastri to be polite with everyone whether sane or mad.

The master told him that he forgave him as it was his principle to forgive anyone who sincerely repented.

This is another ironical twist in the story. Sastri, who went to his master’s house to extract an apology, he, himself had to apologise to the master.

Though he experienced a lot of insults during the course of the day, he thought that he triumphed over his stars that day. Because he thought, he avoided all avoidable talk that would have sparked off quarrels with the other people. It is for that reason that he endured all the insults silently during the day.

Out of Business

“Out of Business” is another story which deals with the problem of unemployment.

Rama Rao was the sales agent of a gramophone company, which, suddenly went out of existence owing to the death of a financier.

Suddenly Rama Rao lost his lucrative business and found himself on the streets. The little money that he inherited from his ancestors, he put it in the agency as security.

Now he lost that security deposit also. All these days his agency earned him money to maintain his family comfortably. He constructed a small bungalow also.

Having lost his business Rama Rao searched for a job to feed his family but failed to get employment.

Rama Rao’s efforts to secure a job remind us of the efforts of the present day youth, who attend every interview without fail, and invariably get disappointed everywhere.

“Thus in ‘Out of Business’ the destructive mental effects of unemployment on a former gramophone salesman are vividly presented, though the suicide that he narrowly escapes would have been a more convincing conclusion than the gratuitous turn of luck that saves him from it”

The destructive effects of unemployment made him frustrated. "As he remembered the futile way in which he searched for a job, and the finality with which people dismissed him, he wished that his wife and children had less trust in him" Thus he finally lost confidence in his capacity.

As an economy measure they shifted from their own house to a small rented house. They shifted their children from their present fashionable nursery school to a free primary school.

In the hope of earning money, some how, he got acclimatised to fill up the crossword puzzles and sending them to a magazine "The Captain". Thus he lost some more money.

Thus having been crushed by the fate from all the sides, one day he decided to commit suicide

Thus the 'destructive mental effects' of unemployment finally drove him to a suicide attempt.

But fortunately as the train was late by three hours, Rama Rao failed in his suicide attempt. The irony is that even in the suicide attempt he failed.

But as he returned home, his wife was eagerly waiting for him. She told him that the tenants of their house were ready to purchase their house offering a good price.

This news elated Rama Rao who came out of his frustration. Now he decided to give up his craze for sending the cross word puzzles. With new plans he wanted to step into a new phase of life.

Thus in this story Narayan vividly described the mental torture of a man, who dragged his life without any job for a long time.

Narayan also doesn't approve of suicide as the solution for the problems of life.

But Iswaran in the story of the same name is an exception, who commits suicide, because of his repeated failures in the examinations.

Thus these stories reveal the mind of Narayan, who sees existence very much in the way of an ordinary man. These stories hold a mirror to the average life

of middle class people, with all their joys and sorrows, stress and strains.

In these stories, Narayan presents a constant struggle on the part of an individual to free himself from the fetters forged on him by the society.

A Hero

Swami the protagonist of "Swami and His friends" once again appears along with his fond granny, sympathetic mother and severe father.

The story gives an interesting description of his ordeal of sleeping in a room all by himself.

While accepting the challenge of his father to sleep alone, he does not foresee that in addition to passing a night of fears and nightmares, he will encounter a burglar.

The unexpected adventure turns him into a hero for his cries at night lead to the arrest of the most notorious house-breaker of the district.

But Swami is reluctant to repeat the experience. He prefers sleeping way by the side of his granny to sleeping alone in a lonely room.

Before recording the conversation held between Swami and his father, the narrator briefs the reader of an incident which took place earlier an encounter of a boy with a furious tiger.

Through conversation we are informed that Swami doubted the theory of his father who advocated that "courage is everything; strength, age are not important."

And at last his father challenges him to prove he was courageous. Swami, though frightened accepts the challenge but tries to postpone but seeing that his father was stern, he had to concede to him gloomily.

He was asked to sleep in his father's office.

After spreading his bed, he tries to sleep and thinks of ghosts and nightmares. He could not sleep.

His frightened state is effectively described by Narayan.

Swami hurriedlybleeding ankle.

Luckily he became a hero. The honour was thrust on him. He was a coward through and through.

His cowardice is recorded by Narayana aptly.

Granny Said... Perhaps die.

Swami was looked upon with respect by his classmates. Congratulations were showered on him.

But in his heart of hearts he was a coward. It was a blessing in disguise. Narayan gives way to Swami's thoughts when the latter was asked by the police inspector.

"Why don't.....later in life."

As far as possible Narayan has tried to be an observer and merely record the things. Though he is at a peripheral level, he is probing into the psyche of the child to bring out his intuitive responses to the situations into which he is forced.

The story reads well and has unity of effect. Narayan divided his stay into two parts the first giving the details of the traumatic experience underwent by Swamy and the later part a concluding one which eulogises the child.

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