



## LAST TWO STORIES OF R.K.NARAYAN –“SALT AND SAWDUST & GURU”: A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English has a prominent place among English and other literatures of the world fiction. R.K.Narayan's writings seem to have found a true and legitimate vehicle for Indian sensibility. One such writing is his last two short stories of R.K.Narayan – *Salt and Sawdust* and *Guru (1993)*. *Salt and Sawdust* is a story of a couple, Veena and Swami and *Guru* is based on a miser and senior retired official, Mr. Gurumurthi. These two stories are infused with Wit and Warmth. They make an essential read for all Narayan enthusiasts.

**Keywords:** Adoption, anecdote, appetizer, ceremony, dentist, interest column, miser, pyol, sawdust, sick centre, stationery mart.

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### INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan enjoys Indian popularity for his remarkable gift of Story-telling. He contributes much for the growth and development of Indian English Short Story. It is well recognised both at the national and international level. His narrative skill is superb. His themes are creative, delightful, witty, humorous and ironic in nature. His stories bristle with innumerable Indian scenes and characters. He delineates his characters with a comic touch. His stories reveal the fullness and intimacy of his knowledge of everyday life. They are distinguished by the extreme simplicity and purity of diction. Stripped of Anand's liberal sprinkling of Indian words and Raja Rao's metaphysical meanings, Narayan's medium is a 'Bharat brand of English'. By using the language of everyday life, Narayan maintains the freshness and the realistic tang of natural speech habits of men and women. There isn't any authorial

intrusion of trifle language or coloured adjectives. This style is characteristically modern which has the lucidity that enlivened the story. Thus, R.K.Narayan is a story-teller par excellence.

### Last two stories of R.K.Narayan:

Narayan is a regional fictionist. His novels are of great values because of deep studies in human relationship particularly family relationships. Usually his focus is within the family. He has written enough fiction. After two years of illness in the last days of life, R.K.Narayan wants to undertake lighter work. The result is the delightful new collection of stories in the form of a book "*Salt and Sawdust*" stories. It has two stories and some prose essays too. Our study is only restricted to two stories—"Salt and Sawdust" and "Guru". They are published in 1993 by Penguin Books of India.

The story "*Salt and Sawdust*" originated from an anecdote narrated by a journalist from Holland. A Dutch lady apparently wrote a laborious bulky novel and sent it to her publishers, who after glancing through it, suggested a joke, that she would be do well to pass her time writing a cookery book. She took him at his word and produced one in the course of time. It becomes a best-seller and continues in that rank for Forty years.

The other story, "*Guru*" is based on a miser, Mr. Gurumurthi. His devotion to wealth and the satisfaction he got from watching the rising figures in his bank-book remained his sole joy in life. It isolated him from his family too. But he did not mind the loneliness in a big house as long as the interest column in his bank-book kept rising.

While writing these two stories, R. K. Narayan himself felt and said in the book *Salt and Sawdust* "I could not overcome my impulse to phrase an experience or a reaction. So, sitting down at a certain hour to fill a sheet of paper becomes a conditioned reflex".

#### Plot-Review of the two stories "*Salt and Sawdust & Guru*"

This is an ironic short story in seven parts about a childless couple: Veena and Swami. They lived in an adequate one-and-a-half room tenement on Grove Street in Malgudi. Their dwelling was designed by Coomar, Owner of Boeing silk wearing factory. Swami was working there. The family of Veena and Swami was amicable. Daily Swami got up at five, drew water from the common well, lit stove and prepared coffee and lunch and left for his factory work at 7-30 a.m. Then his wife, Veena was still asleep. She got up late, gulped down the coffee, swept the floor and cleaned the vessel. After her bath, she lit an oil lamp before the image of god and did daily prayer. After lunch, she watched the street-goers, sitting on the pyol with a magazine to study. She was a writer. She was brooding over a novel which she was planning to write. So Swami bought a two hundred page note book of Hamilton Bond paper from Bari's stationery shop for Veena. Then she scribbled something in the novel. It was the time for Swami to take over the kitchen for the preparation of food.

Several days passed. One day Swami asked Veena about her progress in novel-writing. She said that the heroine was just emerging from her mind. He then asked about her hero too. She replied that her novel's hero was a Chinese dentist. At this point Veena got an idea of her heroine. A girl who lost some of her teeth came to the dentist who told her that the work was a matter of several days. So she had to come daily for some days. Then the God of Cupid was at work, Veena suffused this romance in her novel. Finally the dentist and the girl were married. It was a grand wedding. A lot of people in the town were attended to it. An elaborate feeding programme was described by Veena for a thousand guests in her novel. The feast was well-planned. For two days delicious breakfast was arranged. It had the menu - idly, Uppuma, Dosai, two sweets and fruits preparations with coffee. For lunch, a heavy menu was served with six vegetables and rich preparations. The wedding feast concluded with alight elegant supper. Fried Almonds and nuts were available in bowels all over the place, all through the day. A variety of eatables were available for those with weak teeth or even no teeth. The basic ingredients for the feast were imported from different places-grains and pulses from Tanjore and Sholapur, honey and saffron from Kashmir, apples from Kulu valley, Rose water for Sherbets from Hyderabad, spices, cardamom, cinnamon and cloves from Kerala and Chillies and tamarind from Guntur. The marriage feast was a remembered one in Malgudi. It was spectacular and vibrant. All the paraphelina was supplied by Swami, the home cook to Veena. So he felt proud of his participation in the novel-writing of Veena.

Swami took the completed novel to Bari who suggested Swami to review by a professor of English in a college. After 10 days it was subjected for publication. On the suggestion of Bari, the printing work was taken by a printer, Natesh. He told Swami that he should go through the text for two days for checking no blasphemy, treason, obscenity or plagiarism in the novel. It was a legal requirement for any novel-printing with many warnings of Veena; Swami handed over the note book of novel-writing to Natesh. Natesh read it and the next day he suggested Swami some modifications such as the

story portion kept as usual but description of marriage feast as a separate part and publish it as the first book with little elaboration of more recipes of items for the feast. Then only it would come the best seller. Natesh advised Veena to turn the novel into a cookery book. She followed his advice and put the title of the book, "Appetizer-A guide to Good Eating". It became a best seller. It was translated into other languages too. Veena became famous. She received invitations from various organizations to lecture and demonstrate the contents of the book. Swami drafted her speeches on food subjects, travelled with her and answered question at meetings. Swami became a rich man. He shifted his family from Grove Street to a bungalow in New Extension of Malgudi. Though Swami offered to continue cooking their meals, Veena prohibited him from stepping into the kitchen. She engaged a cook master.

In all this activity, the novel was not exactly forgotten but awaited publication. This is the irony in the story. Instead of a novel, 'cookery book' was published by Veena. Content of the book was supplied by Swami and only she scribbled the matter in a note book. So, "Man proposes but God disposes" is applicable to show ironic twist in the story. Narayan wrote this novel with a lighter vein.

Next, "**Guru**" is the long story of Gurumurthi, a miser who is simply called '**Guru**'. He lived in Vinayak Street of Malgudi. He worked as a senior official in Tahasildar office. Peasants came to Tahasildar office where Guru was working for loans. He was the agency. All applications had to be rubber-stamped on his desk and initialled by him, and for each touch of his seal on any paper, he had to be paid a certain sum of money. Unless this was done by the peasants, their applications could not be animated. Guru kept this bribe money in his inner pocket of his shirt. His wife, Soraja was pious woman. He had two daughters, Raji and Kamala.

Raji married to a crippled boy from a family of Trichy who did not demand dowry. It was a plus point to save money for Guru. Raji lived happily with her husband and they had three children. She came down with her children often to Guru. She could spare one week time only because her husband needed her constant attention. Guru was not fond of

his grandchildren. He was a staunch miser to spend money even on his grandchildren for their eatables. Whenever his wife left to her parents' house, Guru got food from Pankaja Vilas. He spent more than Rs.150/- a month where as if his wife stayed with him, the expenditure went up to Rs.1000/-. He gave his savings of money for interest. He had some shops on Grove Street which were given for rent. He built up assets laboriously, risking his reputation and job.

Guru's second daughter, Kamala was married to an auditor. He was studying for a job. He wanted to go to America for further studies. Her father-in-law was Dr. Cheema of Lawley Extension in Malgudi. Guru Murthi simplified Kamala's marriage to such an extent that even Raji was not invited properly. Marriage was performed at the hill temple and a reception was held in Malgudi. He saved an amount of Rs.50, 000/- which could be spent for his new son-in-law for his studies in America. Dr. Cheema did not take dowry for his son from Guru. Gurumurthi prided himself secretly on managing to marry off both his daughters, without eroding his bank balance. After the wedding the doctor kept reminding Guru's promise of Rs.50, 000/-. Guru had perfected the art of dodging. He kept explaining so many reasons to the dowry money. Even he did not give the promised dress and a diamond ring for Deepavali festival to his new son-in-law. Guru's wife, Saroja did not understand the philosophy of her husband.

Days were passed smoothly. One day, Guru was in his seat, transacting his business in the office. Suddenly collector made his visit to Guru's office. He found Guru's work was unsatisfactory after enquiring with the farmers. The collector asked him to retire or an inquiry steps would be taken on him. He preferred the former. He agreed for retirement. His retirement life was peaceful. He left home every morning, went out and spent his time in free reading room. Some evenings he went and sat on a bench at the Jubilee Park where pensioners gather like him. They discussed the state of the nation and the problems of each other's health. Often he visited his bank on market road to watch the savings burgeoning with monthly interests.

Time passed peacefully. One day Mr. Rao, the stamp-vendor suggested Guru to adopt a boy as a son who light the funeral pyre and perform the rites after his death. He would give him salvation. Guru brought this proposition to his wife and he informed her that he would adopt his brother Sambu's third son, Raghu. He pursued his plan methodically. His brother's family with Raghu came from Dindigul. The adoption ceremony was celebrated by the priests. All was well. Later Saroja left to her mother's house in the village to take care of her old lonely mother. Meanwhile, Raghu lived as the son of the house for four days, greatly puzzled by his new life and stinginess of Guru. One day he slipped away from his 'father' and went to Dindigul. Meanwhile, correspondence was done by Guru and his brother. Matters were delayed. It was done to a loan of Rs.500/- for his brother. He spent his days by eating Pankaj Vilas food. He felt complacent. Later stamp vendor Mr. Rao said shocking news that an adopted son was eligible for partition of his property after his death. So Guru Murthy felt uneasy but comforted his mind with the proviso, "Only if he performs my funeral ceremony, but why should I tell him or anyone of my death?" (p.68). Guru's devotion to wealth and the satisfaction he got from watching the rising figures in his bank-book remained his soles joy in life though he was isolated from his family. This is the pathos and irony of the story.

#### Critique:

Both the stories "*Salt and Sawdust*" and "*Guru*" end with ironic twist. In "*Salt and Sawdust*", R.K.Narayan mentions the troubles of publishing a novel because he, himself experiences while publishing his first novel "Swami and Friends". Being a disciple of Gandhi, R.K.Narayan writes about truth and non-violence here and there in the story. In "*Guru*", the writer talks about price-rise in vegetables and milk which are common now-a-days. It also reflects austerity and simplicity of R.K.Narayan's life. These stories infused with wit, warmth and a wonderful timelessness, making them an essential read for all Narayan enthusiasts.

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