



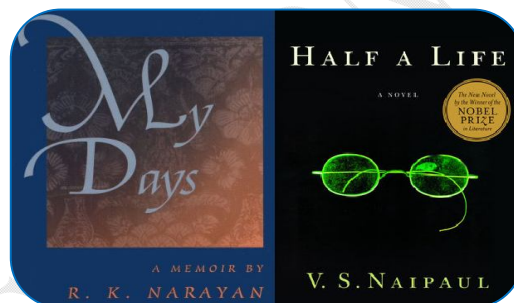
IRONY TURNED TO FICTION IN THE NOVELS OF R. K. NARAYAN & V. S. NAIPAUL

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ABSTRACT :

Naipaul and Narayan share many things in common. Their commendable mastery over the English Language is mostly a legacy of British imperialism which had its sway over India and West Indies for a considerable period. As a member of the third generation Indian immigrant Brahmin community of Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul shares with R.K. Narayan, though he himself denies it, the Hindu religious past and the cultural heritage of traditional India. In their 'collective unconscious', to borrow a Jungian phrase, both Naipaul and Narayan are likely to keep the racial memory of the Vedic past, the Hindu religious myths and legends along with various socio religious practices observed by their ancestors. The great Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata are also common to these novelists. Yet surprisingly enough, striking contradictions are found in the overall influential effect of the common core of cultural heritage upon their minds.



The recurring presence of different shades of irony at various levels in the fiction of Narayan and Naipaul leads to the formulation of the basic hypothesis that they have evolved irony into a major fictional mode. This investigation seeks to analyze the various ways and means by which and the stages through which this progression has taken place. It also aims at throwing into relief the inherent attitudinal differences in Narayan and Naipaul contributing to the ironic mode of fiction with amazing polarity. In hammering out the ironic mode Narayan profitably makes use of traditional Indian myths and legends in a constructive way most often leading to the essence of mythical lore or the regenerative moral vision at the centre of the myth. In contrast to this Naipaul's handling of myths is primarily in the process of negation resulting in the shattering of the mythical core and hence caught in a veritable moral wasteland. Thus the postulate that Narayan's realization of mythical irony could be reckoned centripetal whereas Naipaul's centrifugal.

This paper is a humble attempt to make contrast discernible while handling the irony in the novels of two great novelists namely R.K. Narayan and V.S. Naipul

KEYWORDS : Irony, Fiction, Attitudinal, Myth, Centrifugal, Centripetal

INTRODUCTION

For Naryana spirituality is the manifestation of positivity and leads to an assertion of peace and order in life. But in Naipaul it takes an opposite direction. Wherever he turns he finds only chaos, barrenness, absurdity, exhaustion, panic, and bewilderment. He seems to be insistent on a total negation of stability, warmth, order, and spirituality.

Naipaul rejects Hinduism just as he rejects the multiracial and multilingual flux of the formless Trinidadian society into which he was born. Thus he feels himself a rootless exile and consequently he develops an expatriate sensibility. India, the mythical land of his childhood imagination does not rise up to his expectations and it fails to accept him totally. His search for identity ends in disaster and it results in a detached ironic view of life.

Narayan, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in the Indian tradition and enjoys a feeling of security and homeliness in keeping with his strong faith in the essential continuity of the traditional culture. He was born and brought up in the orthodox atmosphere of a South Indian Brahmin family and his early direct experience of life was solely limited to the provinces of the present day Tamilnadu and Karnataka. Unlike Naipaul, he had never been a stranger either to his land or its people. Narayan finds himself quite at home with his place in the society and is never a victim to any sort of frustration or nightmare. His apparent reverence for Hindu philosophic doctrines and his inherent capacity to derive spiritual consolation from them, in times of need put him at a safer plane in comparison with Naipaul.

While Naipaul had the strong urge to escape from Trinidad at the earliest opportunity available, Narayan never felt the need for leaving his native surroundings either in search of fictional themes or congenial setting. He has created his own fictional setting in the imaginary South Indian town of 'Malgudi'. Malgudi is 'the kingdom of his mind' where he has absolute control over the rich variety of fictional characters occupying it. In spite of all their recognizable local trappings, they are basically human, and they are steeped in humanity. In this sense Malgudi cannot be treated as a mere provincial town or even the fictional microcosm of the whole of India. In an extended sense it has to be taken for the entire world. Narayan being a part and parcel of Malgudi, never faces the problem of exile or homelessness like Naipaul. Naipaul on the other hand does not apparently wish to attach himself to any particular country or culture anywhere in the world. With an affectionate chuckle in his friendly and compassionate eyes, Narayan looks at the inhabitants of Malgudi and depicts their ideals and aspirations, fears and anxieties, little weaknesses and mild eccentricities in their simple life in an ironic vein.

The recurring presence of different shades of irony at various levels in the fiction of Narayan and Naipaul leads to the formulation of the basic hypothesis that they have evolved irony into a major fictional mode. This investigation seeks to analyze the various ways and means by which and the stages through which this progression has taken place. It also aims at throwing into relief the inherent attitudinal differences in Narayan and Naipaul contributing to the ironic mode of fiction with amazing polarity. In hammering out the ironic mode, Narayan profitably makes use of traditional Indian myths and legends in a constructive way most often leading to the essence of mythical lore or the regenerative moral vision at the centre of the myth. In contrast to this, Naipaul's handling of myths is primarily in the process of negation resulting in the shattering of the mythical core and hence caught in a veritable moral wasteland. Thus the postulate that Narayan's realization of mythical irony could be reckoned centripetal whereas and compassionate eyes, Narayan looks at the inhabitants of Malgudi and depicts their ideals and aspirations, fears and anxieties, little weaknesses and mild eccentricities in their simple life in an ironic vein.

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IRONY: VARIOUS MODES

The presence of various strains of irony born out of different sources such as situational manipulations, shifting points of view, mythical correlations, cultural confrontations, character contrasts, thematic peculiarities, and linguistic innovations is a notable feature of the novels of both Narayan and Naipaul. yet a searching scrutiny of the ironic realizations in their major fictions brings to light certain marked differences in the relative emphasis given by each of them to diverse aspects of human life and accepted norms of social values. Further investigation discloses some of the formative influences that mould the general tone and techniques of their fictions. The nature and amount of vitality and motivational urge drawn by Naipaul and Narayan from the common spring of Vedic and Hindu cultural heritage for

fictional creation varies considerably. It is evident that the divergent sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and linguistic environments to which they have been exposed have got a direct bearing on this variation.

A close study of Narayan's novels makes it clear that he is quite at ease with his ardent faith in the essential continuity of the traditional Indian culture and its capacity to offer satisfactory solution to every problem that confronts human beings in their worldly life. He draws spiritual consolation from the Hindu religious teachings and the essential wisdom of the ancient sages contained in the great books of learning such as the Puranas, the Upanishads and the more popular epic works, Ramayana and Mahabharata. He treasures the valuable moral precepts that lie hidden at the core of Indian myths and legends. His unflinching faith in the doctrine of karma keeps his mind always calm and quiet. Yet he always keeps his senses attuned to absorb every minute happening in the world around him. He observes prominent contradictions and comic absurdities in his own life as well as that of the people around him. This observation includes the conflict between the revered traditional and the modern westernized way of life and its after effects as seen reflected in the political, economic, social, and cultural fields. Narayan dedicates himself mainly to the task of depicting the comic subtleties and underlying pathos in the simple lives of the inhabitants of Malgudi, the Kingdom of his mind mixing South Indian realism with gentle irony. His irony is gentle in the sense that it gives rise to neither indignation nor condemnation. His good-natured mockery is not directed specifically against any particular individual or institution. It is rather a general exposure of human frailties with a sympathetic twinkle of the eye if at all Narayan has got any overt satirical victims they are none but the inhabitants of Malgudi who form a replica of the people of India as a whole or in a wider sense, the whole of human race. Narayan's satire is very mild compared to that of Naipaul. As Warren French States, "Narayan is too sophisticated an artist to rail at people for being what they have to be".¹ He is a keen observer of life and manners and his ironic perspective is strikingly empathetic and incredibly impartial. He presents his characters they are without making any special pleading either Narayan is never in doubt "an attitude that allows differences to flower".² Even the most censorious reader will not be able to find out any element of propaganda motive or partisan spirit in his ironic treatment of various themes. As Harish Raizada points out he is "neither a social pathologist nor a religious reformer."³

Narayan is an unassuming keen observer of life and manners. The compassionate tone of his irony persuades the people to look into themselves and amend their ways. His ironic disposition gradually develops into a noble vision of life. This progress becomes all the more evident on comparing the palpable surface irony in the reportorial narrative technique employed in his first novel *Swami & Friends*, with the matured deep level irony brought out of a philosophical probe into the mystery of the common core of reality that underlies all existential illusions, earthly appearances as well

Naipaul's novels keep focus mainly on the Third World, including countries in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean exhibit evidently a distinct psychological conflict that exists between a man's personal identity and his traditional social identity. The rational individual craving to sever himself from the unpleasant bond of a 'static' ancestral culture and the existential agony resulting from the feeling of exile and rootlessness in a hostile alien environment leads him initially to a veritable maze of false hopes and finally to utter disillusionment. All his fervent and feverish attempts to discover and hold on to something of lasting value meet with failure. Thus in Naipaul's novels we come across 'mimic men' without any individuality of their own, snobs, hypocritical careerists, scoundrels, and cold-blooded pseudo-revolutionaries who do not suffer from any prick of conscience either in their dubious motives or in their heinous villainies. Wherever they go they are haunted by the feeling of instability and insecurity and thus they are always in a state of panic and bewilderment. Their shifting loyalty and momentary admiration to melting idols such as that of Jane to Peter Roche in *Guerrillas* or that of the fatherless boy-narrator in *MS* to the eccentric Bogart the bigamist, Popo the carpenter, Wordsworth the poet Morgan the pyrotechnics, the mad Man-Man, and other inhabitants of Miguel Street reveal the absence of any cherished ideal or accepted standard of morality and social order in that 'catfish row' of Trinidad's Port of Spain. Naipaul's protagonists are mainly those who try to impress the former European masters and gain success by imitating the surface features of their culture. He caricatures them with 'castrated irony' and satiric indignation. Their eccentricities are chiefly the products of momentary upsurge of baser instincts and uncouth emotions. Naipaul's intolerance and 'rational rage' against the ridiculously comic life of the soulless silly inhabitants moving about aimlessly in the prison-like post-colonial Trinidad find an apt media of expression in his ironic stance. Whether it sublimates into a vision of life or not, irony gradually gathers

enough momentum to be considered the emphatic mode of his fiction. No one including his friends and relatives is exempted from the violent clash of his satirical whip. At the same time it is not an easy task to find out a convincing answer to the question whether it falls with equal force upon Naipaul himself. Specific and meticulous search into his life and works alone will highlight this point, on the other hand Narayan's irony being mildly pricking and gently tickling does not spare even himself as seen in SF, BA. When irony becomes self-sparing it loses its value as genuine criticism of life and degenerates into a criticism of other people only. But there are several evidences to show that Naipaul's irony is not altogether self-sparing. The thinly-veiled autobiographical note in HB relating to the predicament of his own father, Seepersad Naipaul who was a member of the fast-disintegrating orthodox Brahmin Community of Trinidad is a living example for his self-directed irony. V.S. Naipaul himself is pictured in this book as Anand, the son of Mr. Biswas. Likewise the satirical insinuations in Men are a daring exposure of the psychological tension of the rootless immigrant aspirants in a soulless modern cosmopolitan city. Naipaul is certainly one among them. Though it often appears monistic in nature, his argumentative logic and curt generalizations about plural societies often prove quite sound and predictive. The process of realization as a socio-historic and linguistic phenomenon with its ironic effects upon every walk of life has been portrayed well by him in his West Indian novels.

Enticed by the illusion of freedom offered by the European education and culture Naipaul tries to escape from the colonial isolation of Trinidad to London. But ironically it turns out to be a 'flight to the greater disorder'. The resultant gross despair and disillusionment appears to lead to the final awareness of his own homelessness and alienation. The apparent failure of his search for identity and the quest for home drives him to the inevitable psychic rejection of attachment to any land, people, or culture. His characteristic India-biting has to be evaluated in this perspective, in such a state of mind he seems to become incapable of discovering the truth about India.

As Nissim Ezekiel states, Naipaul's impressions about India as recorded in AAD is only "the truth about Mr. Naipaul. but not the whole truth about India." ⁵ Considering Naipaul's undue concern over the decay of the old customs and ways of life in "the featureless area of darkness that was India" it is difficult to accept his explicit statement regarding the rejection of tradition in toto. His instinctive inability to reconcile himself with the changes that India has had to undergo over the past three thousand years is mainly responsible for his disappointment. As Natwar-Singh points out, Naipaul finds fault "in almost everything he sees: the people's habits and their manners, the cities, bureaucracy, railways, army. Even the TajMahal is not spared." ⁶ The shock in Naipaul's confrontation with the present-day realities of India may be due to the fact that the image of India with which he grew up, as Anand Rao Thota underscores, "has no relevance to the current realities. . . [it] survives 'only as a myth in the racial memory of the Indians themselves, who have reconciled themselves to the disintegrating if not degenerating processes of Kaliyuga, the last phase of their cultural evolution.'" ⁷

Naipaul's passionate eagerness seen in projecting his detached and non-committal stand through such overt statements as 'every man is an island¹, and the like can be taken only as the exaggerated outpour of an unbearable despair resulting from the non-fulfilment of the long-cherished but suppressed craving of his heart to get himself identified with India, the home of his remote ancestors. Nachman's observation, "[W]herever he goes Naipaul is a visitor and he sees"⁸ is true. But in the case of his visit to India it appears, he was not a mere visitor. If he had been one perhaps he would not have experienced the tension between belonging and not belonging, between identification and alienation from the very beginning of his travel. The intensity of emotion echoed in the following words is not expected of a mere visitor. He writes, "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two"⁹. Naipaul might have had the feeling of a son returning to his mother's lap after a long period of separation. Perhaps, it might have upset him on finding himself 'one among the crowd' in India for the first time in his life.

In the technique of using irony as an effective tool Naipaul differs from Narayan. Being an alienated intellectual, Naipaul often uses irony either as a shield or a sword. It enables him "to maintain immunity and neutrality to stay out on his limbs in safety, or to adopt prevailing attitudes without committing himself." ¹⁰ Irony helps him totally himself with the 'whole success racket', while at the same time 'seeing through it' and thus saving his face. Narayan on the other hand well-settled in his self-chosen field of action uses irony neither for offence nor defense in his writings but he uses it to pinpoint and clarify his vision. Irony is only a pair of powerful field-glasses for him.

Narayan and Naipaul make both conscious and unconscious use of myths and legends with due emphasis on their fundamental cultural relevance and popularity. It culminates in the realization of different kinds of mythical irony in their works. In the process Narayan's movement is always directed towards the regenerative moral precept that lies hidden at the core of each myth. Naipaul's attitudinal difference impels him to follow an opposite course for the forging of his mythical irony. While Narayan makes an honest effort to assert and reinforce the cardinal truth or the essence of virtue that lies unseen at the mythical centre, Naipaul disregards it and tries to move away from the centre never to return. This leads to the total negation and shattering of the vital essence of the myth. As a result of this polarization, Narayan's mythical irony assumes a centripetal structural design and Naipaul's centrifugal. A thorough search and detailed analysis of the various levels and patterns of irony in the novels of Narayan and Naipaul carried out in the light of valid canons of critical evaluation and scholarly comments of eminent critics show that both of them have been able to make remarkable advancement towards the goal of evolving their own separate visions of life by the skilful organization of diverse elements of irony into meaningful patterns. In the case of Narayan this comprehensive vision almost appears to be a projection of his traditional philosophic quietism and tolerant outlook. Since Naipaul is averse to such karmic acceptance of life as it is, his irony though partially self-sparing at times, is directed towards a merciless and rather cynical exposure of the neurotic restlessness and the plight of the Third World expatriates who are often lured by the siren-call of the metropolitan hollowness and the insatiable greed for wealth, power, and pleasure. His vision reflects his seemingly pessimistic assertion of the eternal loneliness and irredeemable helplessness of human beings all over the world. It appears to verge on nihilism. The grossness and acute bitterness of his sharp irony make it an infallible weapon against several social evils. Yet underneath this bleak and scathing picture of social and civil disorders a piercing observer may perhaps be able to sense the natal throes of the emergence of an advanced world civilization. Being such a keen observer, Julio Marzon comments as follows: "Underlying Naipaul's writing there is also a positivist vision of an inexorable advance throughout history of a 'universal civilization', before whose patent superiority the past should peacefully surrender."¹¹

Whether Narayan has got any specific target of social reformation or not, virtually the focus of his irony falls on the common frailties of human beings around him. In its natural course it incites social alertness which in its turn gives a fillip to social reformation.

In the ironic treatment of certain selected basic and recurrent themes such as love, sex, marriage, family life, generation gap, vanity, hypocrisy, eccentricities, careerism etc. Naipaul and Narayan display radical differences as well as striking similarities. While Narayan's traditional reservations and inhibitions never allow him to go beyond certain self-imposed limits in dealing with such subjects as sex and love-play, Naipaul has been able to overcome such inhibitions.

CONCLUSION

Naipaul and Narayan do not differ much in the deft use of syntactic variations, literal translations of words and expressions, hybridization of lexical items, direct borrowings from other languages, and such other linguistic devices for the sake of generating staple irony and in the matter of taking full advantage of their multilingual fictional settings. The daring use of regional varieties of English and the local dialects which incorporate in them, some of the salient features of vernacular expressions also empowers them to shape an impressive ironic mode of fiction. The multilingual and the multiracial structure of the Trinidadian society, the bilingualism of the imaginary people of Malgudi, and the common use of Sanskrit for the ritualistic and religious purposes by both the people provide a congenial atmosphere for the successful experimentation of such linguistic tools of irony. This goes a long way in the evolution of irony as a full-grown fictional mode. Apart from this, the skilful manipulation of the point of view technique also is an important factor that plays a significant role in bringing about ironic effect. This is an area which deserves special exploration and offers ample scope for prospective researchers.

The paramount importance of irony as an essential and popular mode of modern fiction has already been acknowledged by leading critics. Writers, especially, those in the Third World including India nowadays focus their attention chiefly on the human susceptibility to corruption. This warrants them to look around through an ironic kaleidoscope. Different shades and patterns of irony appear before them. Being master-craftsmen among them, Naipaul and Narayan have achieved remarkable success in the art of giving them appropriate mythical colouring to highlight their diverse fictional characters and situations. While

Narayan makes a journey to the centre of the myth, Naipaul takes an opposite route to sway away from there for the realization of mythical irony. Despite this polarization and the temperamental divergences evident in their treatment of identical themes of common interest, their irony gradually moves up towards a higher level of maturity and perfection. Their consummate skill in using various linguistic and thematic innovations also accelerate the process of developing irony into an almost perfect mode of fiction. Irony as a fictional mode gains fresh life in the deft hands of Narayan and Naipaul with thought-provoking similarities and baffling dissimilarities.

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