

Talkative Man Vs Common Man: A Comparative Study of R.K. Narayan's *Talkative Man* and R.K. Laxman's *Common Man*

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Abstract: Art is the representation of life through different media. Words are the tools of a writer while lines constitute the paraphernalia of a cartoonist. The art of graphic satire and humour resembles a lot to the satiric and humourous sketches of a creative writer. In both cases, the representation of life emerges from visual sensibility and minute observation which make them create a universe where lines seem to be speaking immediately and words seem to be sketching a lively world of human beings. The present paper concentrates on the works of two artists: R.K.Narayan, whose novels and stories replete with the comic account of humanity and R.K.Laxman whose cartoons capture the entire gamut of contemporary conditions in India. Laxman creates an archetypal *Common Man* who is a silent spectator of multi-faceted humanity, which he minutely draws, pinpointing and highlighting their singularities and absurdities. Narayan's *Talkative Man* is a story teller with an irresistible urge to share his experiences with others. In the novelette *Talkative Man*, he finds himself caught into the mire of troubles as he publishes in his paper a photograph of Dr Rann who claims to be a United Nations' specialist. *Talkative Man* has an affinity with Laxman's *Common Man*.

Keywords: R.K.Narayan, R.K.Laxman, Common Man, Talkative Man, Cartoonist, Comic Writer, R.K.Laxman Ki Duniya, Bakula Bhavesh Vasavda.

“Just as form and colour are used as means by some, who (whether by art or constant practice) imitate and portray many things by their aid, and the voice is used by others; so also in the above mentioned group of arts (poetry and drama), the means with them as a whole are rhythm, language and harmony-used, however, either singly or in certain combination.”(Aristotle, 23-24) Thus spoke Aristotle about the kinship of various kinds of fine arts. Poetry, music and painting- all imitate life through different means which attribute distinct shape to their reproduction and representation, yet a fundamental affinity is bound to be there. Words are the modes of expression for a creative writer while lines constitute the paraphernalia of a cartoonist. However, in the process of creation sometimes the words seem to be turning into lines while lines appear to be relating a tale of their own kind. Hence in the creative output of a literary artist there can be found word sketches which make him resemble a cartoonist. India has a glorious tradition of witty and satiric humour in the form of folklore and popular court jesters of yore. There are thousands of tales related to witty characters like Birbal and Tenaliram, who skillfully enjoyed the liberty of poking fun at the follies of

men and monarchs. Still the art of graphic satire wasn't introduced into India until it travelled from England to this continent. Introducing his volume on the *Common Man* R.K.Laxman writes:

Just over a century ago the art of cartooning came to India from England and struck roots. Although other forms of art like sculpture, poetry and painting had flourished in our country for centuries, the art of graphic satire and humour was unknown. (Laxman, R.K. *Introduction*. v)

The role of the cartoonist in the contemporaneous world is similar to that of the court jester. He has the privilege to exercise his right by criticizing the existing order and ridiculing the persons concerned, with the motif to stem out the rot. The art of a comic writer as well as that of a cartoonist originates from the discrepancies and incongruities of life. A proficient cartoonist observes and pinpoints the contradictions and paradoxes in human situation. Likewise, an adept comic writer employs the word tools of humour, satire, wit and irony to portray the follies of mankind. The art of the both rests on visual sensibility and minute observation, which make them create a universe where lines seem to be speaking immediately and words seem to be sketching a lively world of human beings. The fountain of their art is the same though their tools are different. The present paper is meant to analyse the representation of humanity by two artists, employing dissimilar tools: R.K.Narayan, whose novels and stories replete with the comic account of humanity and R.K.Laxman whose cartoons capture the entire gamut of contemporary conditions in India. Laxman started his career as a cartoonist at a very early age. He was associated with several journals and magazines like *Swarajya*, *Blitz*, *The Hindu*, *Swatantra* and the Kannada humour magazine, *Koravanji*. His first uninterrupted job as a political cartoonist was for the *Free Press Journal*. Laxman, later, joined *The Times of India* and began a career that has spanned for over fifty years. The Times' readers are very fond of his political cartoons and 'You Said It' column that appeared on the front page. Laxman is known for his distinctive illustrations in several books, most notably for the Malgudi stories written by his elder brother R.K. Narayan. Shankar Nag directed a serial on these stories. He also created a popular mascot for the Asian Paints group called *Gattu*. His cartoons have appeared in Hindi films such as *Mr. and Mrs. 55* and a Tamil Film "Kamaraj." Penguin has published several collections of Laxman's cartoons in the series *The Best of Laxman* and *Laugh with Laxman*. For his fabulous art Laxman has been honoured with numerous awards, including the *Ramon Magsaysay Award*, in 1984 and the *Padma Vibhushan* by the Govt. of India, in 2005. Through his graphic representation of contemporary reality, Laxman has emerged as one of the most penetrating satirist of the day. His cartoons are hilarious and thought-provoking. His '*Common Man*' with a gesture of sardonic resignation and meek foolishness happens to be a witness to everything- scheming politicians, shrewd businessmen, aggressive middle- class man, tricky housewives, perplexed masses and so on. Like most Indians, he doesn't protest against endless indignities imposed upon him by the men in

power. This is a 'man in a checked coat', having a 'bald head' with 'a wisp of white hair', 'bristling moustache' and a 'bulbous nose' supporting 'an oversized pair of glasses.' "He has a permanent look of bewilderment on his face. He is ubiquitous." (*Laxman, R.K. Intro ix*) This unique creation of Laxman can be seen hanging around a cabinet room, a slum-area, a public place, a busy street, a housewife's kitchen and the like. Through him, Laxman intends to appeal to the common Indian who has mutely accepted the humdrum around him. He is his creator's instrument to comment on socio- economic and socio- political aspects of Indian life.

R.K.Narayan's gift as a writer is par excellence. His novels present life's little ironies with knots of satire and humour. Along with other works Narayan's fictional territory encompasses several novels and six collections of stories. Beginning with *Swami and Friends* in 1935 he goes on to produce *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Mr Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), *Talkative Man* (1986) and *The World of Nagaraj* (1990). Besides these, Narayan has also produced six collections of short stories: *A Horse and Two Goats*, *An Astrologers's Day and Other Stories*, *Lawley Road*, *Malgudi Days*, *Grandmother's Tale* and *Under the Banyan Tree*. He is chiefly concerned with the representation of middle class Indian society, that is, the *Common Man*, in India. His characters step out of their individual orbit to assume archetypal- rather universal echelon. They represent varied facets of humanity in general. Narayan's portrayal of humanity has been effectively underlined with the same visual sensibility and minute observation that marks the art of a cartoonist. The spectrum of life spread all over the fictional world of Narayan has been tinged with a spirit of brooding comedy, Puckish humour and satiric irony. Narayan employs the dramatic mode of character portrayal often exaggerating the idiosyncrasies of his creations, turning many of them into caricatures. Consequently, his minor characters like the old landlord, the small shopkeeper and the *Sait* are delightful and timeless. In the midst of the conflicts arising from their social context, the men and women of Narayan emerge as comic and grotesque. In each novel of Narayan we come across an exotic world of dreamers, financiers, artists, sanyasis eccentrics and the like; their individual reality is at war with the social reality and it forms the comic pattern. For instance, *Swami and Friends* presents a contrast between the real world of grave intent and children's world of innocence and pleasure. *The Bachelor of Arts* reveals the incongruities of college life as well as the comic infatuation of the youths. *The Financial Expert* deals with the oddities rising from avarice, a common feature of humanity and so on. In his novella *The Talkative Man* Narayan employs 'the literary device of a narrator, who was not Narayan, the bard of Malgudi, but a storyteller in his own right.' (259) The introduction of Talkative Man at the very outset of the novel provides an interesting account of the character:

THEY CALL ME Talkative Man. Some affectionately shorten it to TM: I have earned this title, I suppose, because I cannot contain

myself. My impulse to share an experience with others is irresistible, even if they sneer at my back. I don't care. I'd choke if I didn't talk, perhaps like Sage Narada of our epics, who for all his brilliance and accomplishments carried a curse on his back that unless he spread a gossip a day, his skull would burst. (262)

No name is assigned to TM (*Talkative Man*). His identity entirely rests on his singularity of being a talkative man. His failure to contain himself ascribes to him the trait that is so common among the she- characters that seem to collapse until they speak out whatever information they have collected through their limited resources. One comes across such characters frequently in the comic world of R.K.Laxman's cartoons. Nowadays a TV show is being telecast on SAB TV entitled *R.K.Laxman Ki Duniya*. In the show Bakula Bhavesh Vasavda a.k.a. Baku or Bakudi, wife of Bhavesh and female protagonist of the serial "adores her husband a lot and always says "Bhavesh Matlab Bhavesh" to show her admiration. She thinks Ambika, Piyush and Guni as her own children. She always wants to share things with her neighbours." (*R.K.Laxman Ki Duniya*) Being unable to contain herself, she feels like outpouring the information collected by her to her neighbours Rajni Amma and Neena Apte, and feels relieved when she delivers it to her friends. Likewise, TM has got an ideal listener in his friend Varma, the owner of a Boardless hotel in Malgudi:

Fortunately he was not much of a talker, but a born listener, an ideal target for a monologist: even while counting cash, he listened, without missing a word, as I sat beside his desk and narrated my story. (262)

Moreover, like Laxman's archetypal *Common Man* who cannot confine himself to one place and continues to hang around various places to steal a provoking sight Narayan's TM, too, can be spotted "here and there, at municipal meetings, magistrates' court, the prize distribution at Albert Mission, with a reporter's notebook in hand and a fountain pen peeping out of my (his) shirt pocket." (263) Here TM is assigned the role of a silent observer like the *Common Man* who can be spotted sneaking out a look at various social, political and other activities going on in the country and the states. A note at the end of the graphic illustration conveys hoards of meaning to the viewers. The following sketch from *The Best of Laxman* series reveals how the *Common Man* steals a glance into the election office of a political party and the picture of the dead leader (Mahatma Gandhi) on the wall seems to be sneering at the connections of the party with the



Tell me! Why was I denied a ticket this time? Why this sudden change? I've been loyal to the party!

(The Common Man Goes to the Village, 83)

underworld. The *Talkative Man* voluntarily assumes the role of a journalist though he is not compelled to depend on his journalistic writings for his livelihood as he belongs to a family of landlords who had nothing to do but “wait for the harvest from our (their) village lands and cash from tenants.” (263) Having cherished the dream of becoming a journalist TM never fails to spot the eye-catching spectacles in the town of Malgudi. He reveals it to the readers:

I noticed a beggar- woman one day, at the Market Gate, with Siamese twins, and persuaded my friend Jayaraj, the photographer and framer of pictures at the Market Arch, to take a photograph of the woman, wrote a report on it and mailed it to the first paper which caught my attention at the Town Hall reading room; that was my starting point as a journalist. (264)

This habit of TM again establishes his affinity with *Common Man* whose eye catches every possible sight in the social and political life of the country. The *Common Man* is always found stealing a glimpse of something or the other keeping himself unnoticed like TM who is 'unused to so much publicity.' (281)

His excursions around the town of Malgudi in the role of a journalist have acquainted him with a host of people like Jayaraj, the photographer whose aid he seeks for capturing the images of his innumerable journalistic findings in the town. He seeks his help for taking a photograph of Rann, unnoticed. The old, intolerant librarian of the Lawley Memorial Library and Reading Room is so much fond of TM that he always offers to him the wooden stool which he otherwise keeps forbidden to common readers in the library. The station master also turns to TM when he is caught into a taut situation because of Rann's stay in the waiting room. Gopichand who owes a lot to TM for the establishment of his auto rickshaw business is another easy prey for TM to discuss politics. He leaves no stones unturned to provide an auto rickshaw for the shelter-hunt of Rann. TM's neighbour Ramu who “rarely stirred from his seat on his *pyol*” (288) shuffles along Market Road 'barebodied' to give him the telegram from his editor. The other neighbour Sambu whom TM describes as 'the bookworm' (313) is frequently mentioned in the story. All these friends and associations are the assets of TM, the journalist. They come to his rescue in any challenging situation raised by his vocation. But for his journalistic wanderings TM wouldn't have been caught into the mire of troubles caused by Dr Rann's arrival and his prolonged stay in the town. Dr. Rann who claims to be a man from Timbuctoo, arrives Malgudi on the pretext of working on a United Nation's project. He develops acquaintance with TM by involving him in his shelter-hunt and finally, settles in his vast house. Like Laxman's *Common Man* the *Talkative Man* provides a very expressive sketch of Rann:

Dr Rann was actually, as I discovered later, Rangan, a hardy Indian name which he had trimmed and tailored to sound foreign; the double N at the end was a stroke of pure genius. One would take him to be a German, Rumanian or Hungarian- anything but that he was a pure Indian from a southernmost village named Maniyur, of

the usual pattern:.....He had blonde hair, a touch of greenish-blue in his eyes, and borderline complexion- unusual for an Indian of these parts. (262)

TM digs a pit for himself by sending an article to his editor about the Timbuctoo man followed by his photograph. Having read this article, Rann's wife Commandant Sarasa arrives there for husband hunt. She even outdoes the TM when she opens her mouth to speak. Poor TM is left to describe:

I remained quiet, letting her talk on. It looked as though I'd have to surrender my title of Talkative Man and take a second place in the world of talkers. (312)

TM manages for the abduction of her husband by Commandant Sarasa herself. The public meeting organized for Rann's lecture on Futurology at Lotus Club is also an occasion that provides enough material to suit well the world of Laxman's cartoons. The speech of the minister exposes how most of the leaders used the Gandhi mantra to mesmerize the public. In the following clipping from *The Very Best of the Common Man* volume the *Common Man* jeers at the obsession of the leaders with the spell of Gandhi.

The scene created by the hecklers during the Deputy Minister's speech is commonly found in the political cartoons of Laxman. As the minister proceeds with his harangue on his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi people feel bored:



We hear his call to quit India even today. My own two sons are NRIs in the USA...

(p 151)

From out of the group of students was heard a voice saying, 'We want to hear the speaker of this evening.' Undaunted by this request, accustomed as he was to hecklers in parliament, the minister retorted cheerfully, 'You are right. I'm also anxious to hear our friend on the subject of- He had to refer again to the piece of paper. 'But let me finish what I was saying...After fifteen minutes while his hecklers looked resigned to their fate, he sat down. (357)

The departure of the minister leaving Rann's lecture with an excuse of another meeting is also a laughter provoking sight. To save Rann from the mess in the midst of his lecture on Futurology, threatening the existence of man on this planet, TM is found dragging him 'out to the back of the stage' (362) and, finally he is dispatched into the custody of his wife. TM's reaction to the discourses on 'the fiasco at the Town Hall' bears resemblance to the silent bewilderment of Laxman's *Common Man*:

But one of the members explained: 'It seems the lecturer threatened to blow up the earth with an atom bomb. I was not there, of course, but my nephew, who is studying at Albert Mission, told me that the lecturer made a threatening speech.'... 'But the

Deputy Minister's speech was wholesome and inspiring, I learn,' added someone else. I never corrected any statement or defended Rann. Not my business. (367)

The portrayal of common man in the above draft is one of an unconcerned listener who seems to be busy with the newspaper while he overhears the conversation between the two beggars in the backdrop of the news headlines '80 Days of Fasting Ends!' Narayan's *Talkative Man* seems to have been clad into the garb of Laxman's *Common Man* embodying several of his traits. His reactions to various situations bear the stamp of his counterpart's archetypal image. Both Narayan and Laxman portray humanity in their own peculiar way. Their canvas is more or less the same; their tools are different yet their representation of life resembles largely.



I hope the PM ends fifty years of my starving!

(The Common Man Goes to the Village, 28)

Laxman's cartoons carry a story-telling background. His *Common Man* may remain silent and meek but his sketches speak a lot to wake up the *Common Man* of India. The novels of Narayan unfold the layers of humanity with the keen eye of a cartoonist. Narayan's words and Laxman's graphs seem to convey almost the same meaning to the readers and viewers.

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