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The Shaping Influences on RK Narayan's Architectonic Quality

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Abstract:

The architectonic quality is rarely found among the works of the literary artists. It is an organizing quality that integrates the design of a work of art. It harmoniously blends almost all the elements of a work. A work of art is blessed with the architectonic quality when almost all its constituents and all its characteristic elements run into, and feed, one another for healthy development. RK Narayan's novels possess architectonic quality. My study reveals that except for a few implied hints at the architectonic quality no critic has so far thrown light on this quality in his novels. This article is an attempt to examine the shaping influences of RK Narayan's Architectonic Quality.

Keywords: RK Narayan, Architectonic quality, organizing quality, constituents, characteristic elements, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy.

Introduction to Architectonic quality

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami (10 October 1906 – 13 May 2001), better known as RK Narayan, was an Indian writer and novelist known for his amazing work set in the fictional background of South Indian town of Malgudi. As Narayan wrote novels, novellas, newspaper columns, essays, short stories and retelling of Indian epics and myths, he came to be recognised as one of India's greatest Indian English writers from 1950 onwards.

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“The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related and are in steadfast proportion one to the other. So, far as high poetry, truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter.”

What Arnold speaks of the blending of matter and manner is equally true of the blending of all the constituents and all the distinguishing elements of a work of art. Moreover, what he speaks of poetry is true of all the *genres* of literature— drama, poetry, fiction, and prose. A work of art is said to possess the architectonic quality when all its constituents and the distinguishing elements not only meet and mingle but also, losing their individual identities, get transformed into something new. Shelley wrote:

The Shaping Influence of Shakespeare

R. K. Narayan owes his architectonic quality to Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy. Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an ideal artist for the development of his architectonic quality. The creativity of Shakespeare lies in the harmonious blend of plot and character. His slight bent towards character developed perhaps as a reaction against Aristotle's dictum that plot is the soul of tragedy. But the genius of Shakespeare lies not in accepting and treating things separately but in blending them in a harmonious whole. His imaginative faculty comprehends all the different factors of his art as one, and mingles them into one whole. This forms the architectonic quality in his plays. Let us illustrate this quality from his *Hamlet*.



The successive events in Hamlet happening in quick succession are organized into a plot. The plot is inextricably bound to character. The events reveal and develop the character of Hamlet. The appearance of the ghost, for example, reveals his scientific approach and the play-within-the play scene his psychological approach. On the other hand, it is his character that develops the plot and gives it a turn. Had Hamlet been credulous and superstitious, and had believed in what the ghost told him, the tale would have gone the other way. Had he been thirsty for revenge, had he not regarded himself as a spokesman of divine justice, he would have given the king Claudius a short shrift at the latter's prayer, and the story would have moved differently. This is the cause-effect relationship of plot and character. This relationship is bound to the supernatural element of the humane ghost and the fate element. All this knitted organization is further bound for its effect to Hamlet's dilemma, his father's foul murder, his extreme love for his lascivious mother, his keener anguish at his mother's fall, the treachery of his uncle Claudius, the betrayal on the part of Ophelia, his brooding and the consequent circumstantial delay in the execution of action. All these elements and several other things make one harmonious whole by running into one another in Hamlet. Narayan must have been impressed by this architectonic quality.

The Shaping Influence of Jane Austen

The genius of R. K. Narayan is, in many respects, similar to that of Jane Austen (1775-1817). He seems to have learnt much from her in many ways. He seems to have been immensely influenced by her narrow range, perfect pure art, plot-construction and, above all, by her architectonic quality. The range of Jane is narrow. So is Narayan's. She is not prepared to leave 'her little bit (two inches wide) of ivory.' Nor does Narayan leave the narrow world of his novels. The action of her novels takes place in a few villages, and her characters rarely go outside them. The action of Narayan's novels takes place in Malgudi, and his characters rarely go outside it. Jane Austen has a limited range of characters. The characters in Narayan's novels, though not as few as they are in hers, are never crowded as they are in those of Dickens.

Jane was writing in the age of the romantic revival and the Napoleonic war but there is about her work no trace of them. She is, like John Keats, a pure artist. She is just about her business. Though her theme of money and marriage is social and she flings her sharpest irony at the least lapses, yet she treats everything unobtrusively. And, except in *Sense and Sensibility*,

she never transcends the cool and modest reasonable love. Likewise, we do not find in Narayan's novels any politics or any philosophy. Though Gandhi is there in his *Waiting for the Mahatma*, he almost remains sidetracked because the main theme of the novel is love affair between Bharti and Sriram. And though there are a lot of social issues in his novels, yet they are treated, as they are done in Jane Austen, humorously, ironically, unobtrusively.

Jane Austen is perfect in plot-construction. She constructs her novels logically and artistically. The events, consequent upon one another, move organized in quick succession. There is no slackness about them. The greatest thing about them is their inevitability. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* is so skilfully constructed that it can in its artistry and magic of construction, be favourably compared to any great play of Shakespeare. There are no superfluous events in the novel. The Lydia elopement, which some critics regard as superfluous, and not in accordance with the character of Wickham, is not only desirable but also essential to the plot. It is this episode that opens the eyes of Elizabeth regarding the true character of Darcy, and brings them closer, rather closest. The happy end of the novel is not only desirable but also inevitable. Its artistic, inevitable happy end can favourably be compared to Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. The plots of Narayan are a bit different from those of Jane Austen because in some of his novels like *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, he seems to have been influenced by the stream-of-consciousness technique. So far as the sad and mysterious ends of the novels are concerned, as they are those of *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*, he seems to have been influenced by the short stories of Tagore. And yet so far as the well-arranged and tightly knit construction of the plot is concerned, he seems to have been influenced by Jane Austen. In this respect his novel *The Financial Expert* can be compared to *Pride and Prejudice*. The end of all these works, which is remarkably great about a work of art, can be seen in the beginning. We can say about these works what T.S. Eliot said, "In my beginning is my end."

There is nothing in *Pride and Prejudice* that disturbs or interrupts the movement. There is nothing in it that does not further the movement ahead, nothing that does not help the desired effect. There is nothing either in character or episode which does not contribute to the happy end. The Netherfield ball sets the ball moving. The title is the summum bonum of the novel. *Pride and prejudice* spring up, then swell, then melt, and then are dissipated into harmony. If it is the ball that sets them into motion, it is the Lydia elopement that melts them. Every character



and episode do something or the other about them, either flare them up or cool them down. Had Mrs Bennet not been foolish and had Mr Bennet not been an armchair philosopher, the silly, flirt Lydia would not have eloped. Consequently Elizabeth and Darcy would not have come closer. And if this elopement brings them closer, the visit of Lady Catherine de Bourgh to Longbourn ironically brings the happy end. Jane Austen has comprehended everything as one, as contributing to the desired effect. This novel must have inspired Narayan who tried to emulate her. Narayan has done wonderfully well about this art in almost all his novels. And if in respect of the organic plot, *Pride and Prejudice* can be compared to Hamlet, Narayan's *The Guide* can be compared to *Pride and Prejudice*.

The Shaping Influence of Thomas Hardy

R. K. Narayan owes for his Malgudi, plot-structure, and the architectonic quality to Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) as well. He has many things in common with Hardy in the field of plot-construction. Though he is influenced in his plot structure by the stream-of-consciousness and his characters like Jagan and Krishna are lost in nostalgia, he writes, on the whole, simply well, creating simple plots, arousing the age-old curiosity of his readers regarding "what happened next." He shares this simplicity of plot from Thomas Hardy who is a past master in arousing the curiosity of his readers. The plots of Narayan seem to be faultless in their structure. This he has certainly learnt from Thomas Hardy. We should not forget that Hardy was the son of a mason, who builds the house brick by brick. Hardy has used this architecture in the plot-construction of his novels whose plots he builds, like his father, brick by brick.

William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy are the great exponents of architectonic quality. We cannot say about the tragic art of Hardy, as we do say about that of Shakespeare, that character is destiny. What is to be said about him is the other way round. We can say about his tragic world that destiny is character. However, the characters of Hardy, like the Grecian characters, do their best to seek happiness in a world tossed about by misfortune. His characters are inextricably bound not only with their action but certainly also to their misfortunes, and, above all, to the Wessex. His characters, plots, fate, and Wessex are harmoniously wedded to one another convincingly. Sometimes he may overdo the effect as he does about the blighted star episode of *Tess*, but, on the whole, he creates a balanced tragic outlook that happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain and that the

President of the immortals sports with the lives of the human beings. This tragic drama is, in his novels, played on the stage of Wessex. Thus we find in his novels an inner harmony running through plot, character, destiny, and Wessex. It is this harmonious blending among the constituents and the characteristic elements of his art that can fairly be called the architectonic quality. It is this quality that Narayan has learnt from him.

The greatest influence of Hardy exerted on Narayan, however, is that of the region. As Hardy created the Wessex as the background of his tales, Narayan has created Malgudi, which serves as the background to the action of his tales. The similarities are close. The characters of Hardy rarely step out of the Wessex. In the same manner, the characters of Narayan rarely overstep the premises of Malgudi. But even if they ever do so, they soon come back. Hardy's Wessex is Narayan's Malgudi. In Hardy Wessex is not only the background but also a living character. According to W.H.Hudson:

“Whether it is the dour vastness of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, the luscious ripeness of Black moor vale in *Tess*, or the tree-girt solitude of *The Woodlanders*, Hardy's place are fully as memorable as his people.”

In *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath, the prototype of the Wessex, is very much a character as the retreat is there in *The Vendor of Sweets*. Egdon Heath acts as a villain when a snake bites Mrs. Yeobright. The gutter in Vinayak Mudali Street in *The Financial Expert* is Narayan's Egdon Heath, which destroys the red account book and the banking career of Margayya. Narayan has emulated Hardy. His benign Malgudi has a transforming spiritual power. The retreat in *The Vendor of Sweets* transforms Jagan into a sage. It is only the Malgudi Nature that makes it possible for Krishna to communicate with the soul of his wife Susila in *The English Teacher*.

This brief study shows that R.K.Narayan is indebted to his architectonic quality to Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy.

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