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A Study of R. K. Narayan's "An Astrologer's Day" – Through the Lens of Folklore

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Abstract

R. K. Narayan's *An Astrologer's Day* is a short story taken from his widely celebrated story collection *Malgudi Days*. The story is a vivid portrayal of Indian folk life. The setting of this story is a market of the fictional town, Malgudi. The story has literary elements of irony, humour, deception, coincidence and folk motifs. It centres around a fraud astrologer whose occupation depends on a popular folk-belief. This paper explores the folk aspects in the story within an urban setting. It focusses on folk-belief such as astrology and superstition, folk occupation like astrologer, folk setting such as market as a place of communication, and oral communication performed by the characters of this story. The story becomes a reflection of folk belief system which helps to form an identity, earn livelihood, and interact with communities. Narayan has depicted astrology as a livelihood where the astrologer performs his occupational duty based on folk belief, wearing saffron costume and using some mystic tools, and providing satisfactory prediction to his customers. The market represents a miniature folk society. The paper explores a complex interaction among folk-belief, folk-identity, folk-space and folk-performance where fate and, irony play an important role for survival.

Keywords: Astrologer, Folk belief, Folk profession, Folk setting, Oral performance, Irony

Introduction:

Indigenous traditions, cultural practices, and real-life experiences of ordinary people are portrayed in Indian English Literature. R. K. Narayan¹ was one of the major canonical writers of the beginning of Indian English fiction. He has prominently presented Indian town-folk and middle-class life both in his novels and short stories. In his pen, the fictional town, Malgudi, appears to be a realistic representation of South-Indian society.

In *An Astrologer's Day*, Narayan presents the past life and present livelihood of a fake astrologer. He makes general predictions to satisfy his customers without any genuine astrological knowledge. The story appears as an ordinary story of deception and revelation

with ironical presentation. But a close reading of this text shows that the story is rich in folk aspects like folk-belief, folk occupation, folk space, and oral communication. In India, astrology is a traditional belief system. It functions as a living tradition. It impacts on its believers regarding daily horoscopes, marriage matching, business ventures, and personal crises. The protagonist of this story is placed within this belief system. Narayan has created a folk-space, a vibrant marketplace filled with variety of trades such as medicine sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, auctioneer, fried groundnut vendor. The astrologer is also a part of this folk-space. He does not criticise or mock at the astrologer but shows that folk belief sustains occupational identity and economic survival. Through this short story, this paper explores a dynamic interaction between performance and belief, illusion and reality, and fate and coincidence within Indian folk society.

Literature Review:

Kalpna Upadhyaya² has explored three forms of superstitions, namely, cultural superstitions, religious superstition, and personal superstitions in the fiction of R K Narayan. The researcher views that the superstitions have deep roots and cannot be uprooted with all the scientific and technological advancement.

Ramudu, P. Siva ³ has explored how Narayan blends suspense with humour for portraying a fake astrologer who is desperately trying to protect himself. The researcher also has explored Narayan's ability to blend humour with social realism. Marks of ash and vermilion are considered as sacred. Here Narayan has given his astrologer an authentic representation. But at the end of the story the readers understand his hypocrisy. The researcher has explored this suspension blended with humour.

Kapilesvar Parija⁴ has explored common Indian beliefs in astrology, fate, and superstition as portrayed by Narayan in a realistic manner. The researcher has explored Narayan's effective storytelling technique using humour and irony for capturing reader's attention till the end of the story. Though fictional, his stories depict real life and thus provide universal appeal.

Objective:

The paper aims to explore various folk dimensions of Narayan's story, *An Astrologer's Day* such as:

- Representation of Folk beliefs in astrology
- Folk profession and occupational identity
- Marketplace as a folk-space
- Folk performance and interaction
- Folk narrative structure
- Exploration of folk motifs
- Use of irony and moral resolution

Discussion:

Astrology as a Folk Belief:

Astrology occupies a dominant position in Indian folk culture. Though it is a pseudoscience, in traditional Indian society, it has immense influences in agriculture, business, marriage, travel, etc. It becomes a part of religion, ritual, and everyday life. In this story, astrology is presented as a part of folk belief.

In the beginning of the story R. K. Narayan clearly mentions that the astrologer does not know anything about astrology. But he can understand human psychology about fear, hope, and insecurity. Whenever any customer approaches him, the astrologer first observes his customer's facial expressions. He lets them speak their personal problems without making any comment. Then he makes general predictions which are suitable to everybody. These predictions offer confident and immediate remedies to his clients. Thus, he relies on minute observation, shrewd guesswork, satisfactory and confident speech, and generalised predictions for his success. His success represents that folk belief systems often depend on traditional faith rather than scientific logic.

The astrologer's occupational tools are a dozen cowrie shells, a square cloth with mystic charts, palm-leaf manuscripts and a notebook. With these tools he evokes traditional beliefs about the authenticity of an astrologer. He wears saffron turban, and applies ash and vermilion mark on his forehead. His costumes evoke a sense of spirituality associated with folk belief. His customers mistake his sharp gaze as prophetic light, but to the astrologer it is actually search for customers. Thus, appearance plays an important role in sustaining folk belief.

Folk profession and occupational identity:

The astrologer represents a folk profession within folk society. Modern jobs require degrees, or diplomas, and institutional certificates. But the success of folk professions depends on reputation, performance, and inherited identity. Surprisingly, the astrologer does not inherit this profession. His ancestors belonged to agrarian community. The protagonist of this story employed the occupation of an astrologer as a strategy to save himself. At the end of the story, he confesses about his past crime and reason of escaping from his village. He escapes to Malgudi town and adopts a new occupation. This shift in occupation emphasizes occupational adaptability in folk economies, performance-based identity, and survival through adaptation. Here the astrologer's identity is moulded rather than passed down through generation as it was not his family profession. His profession is a medium of survival within a flexible town-folk society.

In Malgudi town, the astrologer charges three pies for each question. The payment is small but significant. Before leaving his village, he was a farmer. So, his earning was seasonal, depending on crops. Now in town, his present earning is immediate, daily basis, depending on the number of customers. This shift of profession highlights economic adaptability from rural economy to urban economy.

Folk Setting: Marketplace as a Folk Space

The setting of the story is a busy and lively market with many traders such as medicine sellers, auctioneer of cheap cloth, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, vendors of fried groundnuts and an astrologer. Such a setting is significant for creating a folk space. The market is a centre of gathering where people gather not only for selling or purchasing but also for entertainment, social interaction, and exchange of information. It is a public place where people from diverse backgrounds and places assemble for various purposes. The market becomes a meeting place for people from diverse backgrounds. In this story the market reflects the collective nature of folk culture by highlighting the interdependence of occupations.

In folk culture, shades of big trees are often used as gathering spots for storytelling, decision-making, spiritual discourse, and meditation. The astrologer sits under a tamarind tree in the market with his special costumes and professional tools to present himself as a spiritual person. His presence in the market presents some elements of binary opposition. He sits between light and shadow which reflects the ambiguity of his profession. He is not a genuine astrologer; he has taken the disguise of an astrologer to save himself from his past crime. So, he lives between reality and deception. He is totally ignorant of the stars and planetary positions but he understands human psychology. It shows the binary opposition between ignorance and knowledge. The dim light of the market also enhances the mystic ambiance surrounding the astrologer which makes his performance more impressive.

In *An Astrologer's Day*, the market functions as a traditional folk space where traditional occupations, folk-beliefs, and oral interactions merge together. Narayan uses this setting to portray the everyday life of common people. Through this depiction, Narayan has successfully portrayed the liveliness of Indian folk life within a single day in the market area.

Folk Performance and Interaction:

The market functions as a performance platform where characters perform their respective role. The magician entertains the spectators, the medicine seller publicizes loudly, the vendors and auctioneer call out to attract customers. This performative nature of the market expresses oral and visual traditions of folk culture.

The astrologer's occupation also depends on performance. His saffron turban, mark of ash and vermilion on forehead, and sharp eyesight create a mysterious personality. This outlook helps him to attract customers. He lets his customers tell their own problems before offering predictions. This method reflects oral traditions, where communication is oral rather than in written words. Customers approach the astrologer with personal problems, and he offers general but satisfactory advice. This interaction reflects the nature of folk communication, where knowledge is shared orally and solutions are provided through experience rather than scientific reasoning.

The performance reaches to its climax when Guru Nayak appears before the astrologer. The astrologer has a hidden past. Once in a drunken mood he quarrelled with Guru Nayak, stabbed him, and left him into a well thinking him dead. After this he too left his village. When he recognizes Guru Nayak, he depends on his past experience for answering his questions instead of generalised guesswork. This time his deception turns out to be the instrument of truth. His performance saves him from exposure and potential danger.

Folk narrative structure reflected in *An Astrologer's Day*:

Although *An Astrologer's Day* is a modern short story, it exhibits structural similarities with folktale patterns. The protagonist of this story is not a real astrologer. His forefathers were farmers. He too also cultivated his own cornfield in his ancestral village. One day he escaped from his village, without informing anyone. He settled in Malgudi town, where nobody knew him, disguised as astrologer, married a young woman and started a family life. He has a hidden past which is revealed at the end of the story.

The encounter between the astrologer and Guru Nayak is another common structural similarity with folktale. Initially the astrologer could not recognize him. When Guru Nayak lit a cherut he had a glimpse of his face and recognize him. The astrologer becomes uncomfortable after seeing his face. This uneasiness indicates that there is some hidden

connection. Guru Nayak could not recognize him partly because of the light and shadowy atmosphere and partly because of his disguise. This confrontation builds suspense leading to a dramatic climax.

Test or challenge is another folk motif. The stranger challenges the astrologer to answer the exact questions framed by him. At first the astrologer does not accept the challenge but when he gets the glimpse of the face of the stranger, he accepts the challenge. He gives satisfactory answers, utters his name and wins the challenge. He even predicts the upcoming danger of the life of Guru Nayak. The final resolution happens when the astrologer confesses everything to his wife that he once stabbed Guru Nayak and escaped from his village. This confession resolves the mystery of his earlier behaviour when he met Guru Nayak. Such revelations are characteristics of folk narratives, where secrets are disclosed at the conclusion.

Folk motifs explored from this modern story:

An Astrologer's Day is a modern fiction rather than a mere folktale. Still there are various folk motifs that can be interpreted by applying Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk Tales. In the beginning of the story R. K. Narayan informs his readers that the protagonist of this story has taken the disguise of an astrologer and at the end of the story befools Guru Nayak with this disguise (Motif K311.4.6: Deception in disguise of an astrologer). The astrologer first closely observes his customer's facial expressions and listens carefully his personal problems (Motif H962: Task performed by close observation). This long practice of close observation has sharpened his perception. He can understand his customer's problem within five minutes (Motif J50: Wisdom acquired from close observation). He analyses mankind's troubles through guesswork, long experience and general predictions (Motif J10: wisdom acquired from experience).

The climax of the story begins when the astrologer encounters Guru Nayak. Guru Nayak challenges him to give answers to his particular questions. He does not want any generalised prediction because he was in search of a particular person. Initially the astrologer feels uncomfortable because he is not habituated to such challenge. When he gets a glimpse of Guru Nayak's face he recognises him tells stories of his past life (Motif H11.1: recognition by telling life history). Although the astrologer knows Guru Nayak's past, Guru Nayak cannot recognise him because of his costume and completely new appearance like a holy person (Motif U110: Appearance deceives). The astrologer tells him that he was stabbed and pushed into a well (Motif S142: Abandonment in well). He assures him that his enemy is dead. He also advises him to return to his village. The astrologer further warns him not to travel southwards (Motif C614.1.2: Forbidden direction: South) because there is an impending danger if he leaves his village (Motif M340: Ominous future prediction).

Returning home, the astrologer confesses his past deeds to his wife. At a young age, he once stabbed a man, left him in a well presuming dead, and escape from his village. In Malgudi town, he took disguise of an astrologer (Motif K521: escape by disguise). His saffron-coloured turban, sacred ash and vermilion mark in the forehead, and intense gaze helped him not to be exposed as a criminal (Motif K521.2: change of bodily appearance so as to escape). But the astrologer was mentally suffering as he committed the crime in a drunken state. When he comes to know that Guru Nayak is alive, he gets relief from his heart (Motif U262: suffering healed by time).

Use of irony and moral resolution:

R. K. Narayan creates suspense, humour, and surprising twist through irony in his story *An Astrologer's Day*. He uses situational irony, dramatic irony, and verbal irony, all contribute to its folk narrative structure.

The astrologer is believed to be a wise and knowledgeable person who predicts the future of others. In this story, the astrologer knows nothing about astrology. His success depends on close observation, understanding of psychology, guesswork and general predictions. This creates an ironic situation between appearance and reality. Another situational irony appears when the astrologer encounters Guru Nayak, whom he once stabbed and presumed to be dead. The astrologer accurately predicts Guru Nayak's past and future not because of his astrological knowledge but because of his awareness of facts. Thus, the fake astrologer turns genuine in this particular situation. This is example of situational irony.

The astrologer's predictions often contain verbal irony. He tells Guru Nayak that the man whom he is searching has been crushed under a lorry. Ironically, the man whom Guru Nayak is searching is the astrologer himself and is sitting in front of Guru Nayak. He believes the astrologer's prediction and leaves, without understanding that he has just talked to his attacker. The astrologer's prediction is misleading but serves his purpose. He appears as a well-wisher but is actually protecting himself from being caught. This is an example of verbal irony as well as the most powerful situational irony.

In this story, dramatic irony becomes evident towards the end of the story. After Guru Nayak leaves, the astrologer returns home and confesses to his wife that he once stabbed a man and escaped from his village, without mentioning the name. At this point, the reader understands that the stranger is none other than Guru Nayak. The reader also realizes the danger faced by the astrologer and cleverness by which he escaped. This dramatic irony also restores moral balance. The astrologer comes to know that the man whom he once stabbed is alive and gets relief from his guilt. Here fate also plays a crucial role like folktale.

Conclusion:

R. K. Narayan's *An Astrologer's Day* combines folk elements within a modern short story framework. Narayan has created a folk atmosphere through a folk space like market, folk belief like astrology and folk people like common men, within an urban setting. The story follows a simple narrative structure like a folktale – the protagonist having a hidden past, unexpected confrontation with the antagonist, test leading to the climax, and final resolution. Irony plays an effective role in strengthening the folk elements. The unexpected twist of the story resembles folk tales where wit, fate and chance play a crucial role. Thus the story represents Indian folk culture, where belief, performance, fate, and irony are blended to human experience.

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