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Humor and Double Discourse in R. K. Narayan's *A Horse and Two Goats*

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Abstract: A humorous telling of an encounter between a South Indian villager Muni, and an American enterpriser, who Narayan simply refers to as the "American". What ensues is the characters endeavouring to strike a mutually accepted signifier and failing, leading to a clash of signs, meanings, narratives, and understanding - enabling a double discourse of parallel meanings that never quite converge. The paper attempts to understand the geopolitics and cultural signifiers at play, that contribute to the misunderstanding, and Narayan's stroke of genius in his humor.

Introduction:

A Horse and Two Goats by R. K. Narayan, featured in *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Short Stories*, was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1970. It is a simple, humorously put telling of the encounter between the native Muni, and the American man, a New Yorker trying to strike a deal with Muni. Narayan builds his tale with a double discourse enriched by the various incongruous, dichotomized elements and themes that come out in the story. This paper investigates the active double discourse on which the narrative runs, comprising economic, and socio-cultural disparities, and the humor situated in its friction.

We find Narayan depicting a picturesque nativity, something he characteristically does; fleshing out a character of the town the story revolves in. *A Horse and Two Goats* is no different. We enter into the story with the narrator laying out the topographical information for the readers, of the town Kritam: a “microscopic dot” on the district survey map of South India. The tone of antithesis and irony in the status quo is already established in the story when we find out the narrator divulging the meaning of the word Kritam; a crown. The scale of the setting is ridiculously infinitesimal, with the very essential Narayan-esque figure, the town, becoming a closed-off microcosmic site allowing language negotiations to be read with a pinch of salt. The accessibility to the town in relation to the rest of the country is already questionable, and thus having an American visitor wanting to make sense of the native’s words in trying to purchase a statue of a horse which does not even belong to the native comes off as an attempt to caricature the cultural divide. It is also notable to consider Narayan’s brother, R. K. Laxman’s influence on his works, the latter is known to create illustrations, cartoons and caricatures, representing the voice of “the common man”. Laxman also illustrated the short story, positing Muni as one such common man. Narayan aptly brings out the cultural clash in the microcosmic space he creates, and the miscommunication that carries the dialogism forward evokes humor in the story.

Poverty and the economic divide form a large part of the thematic structure of the short story. The narrator amplifies the divide and the incongruity with the antithesis in his language. The starkness in the realities of the characters in the story is preempted by Narayan as he has the narrator vividly describe the grand architecture of the ‘big house’ while the rest of the houses in town are made up of “unspecified”, insignificant materials, asserting that their lives and realities are cornered into an equally lesser known, insignificant periphery. Poverty looms large in the life of Muni, and the narrator draws a distinction to what his life was like before, when he was relatively prosperous, with twenty goats to graze, and how the lunch his wife prepared for him was different then. The narrator lets the passage of time and the effect it has on the protagonist shape our understanding of the change in fortune, evoking sympathy for Muni. Narayan lays out an evident incongruous duality in the economic landscapes of Muni and the American, one having two goats and a wife who works in the only *pucca* house in town, while the other, with his “modest” business, is able to include himself in book clubs, with a ridiculously insignificant Television time per day: two minutes, a fortieth-floor office space in the Empire State Building, a sales graph to measure and determine his movement in the American capitalist society. The past and present juxtaposition are also evident in Muni’s marital life, as we are told that Muni and his wife were

married as kids, and he used to beat her initially, but over the years she has come to have an upper hand in the meagre financial state, with Muni getting old, relegated to uselessness and inaction. It is also interesting to note that even in his relatively prosperous days, Muni was not able to come to par with the Brahmin boys who were given regular education in temples. It also stands as a remark on how difficult it is to transgress class and caste boundaries, majorly for the working class, who, even in their wealthy phases of life, do not find themselves accepted in elite social circles and the upper echelons of the society.

Language disparity is central to the workings of the story, where Narayan offers a critique on the Anglocentric notion, with the knowledge of English being considered as a parameter of quality education. The colonial enterprise has made the colonized believe that their native language is indeed inferior, and their subjugation reasonable. Muni not knowing English is often read as a lacking in him, since the second half of the twentieth century already saw the English language momentum escalate and normalized. Muni does not panic about his not knowing or being able to decipher the American's language, he only panics on his assumption that the American could be a government or a police officer, using his authority over Muni while inquiring about the murder that happened close by, an assumption stemming out of an anxiety that is largely derived from the colonial hangover of the white man exercising his authority over the native. For him, the English language is not distinctive under American and British. It is simply foreign, a *parangi* language, derived from the Persian word *firang*. Narayan brings up the idea of a normalized English education within the privileged class, when we find that Muni is the only native who has such difficulty in understanding the American's language, who in turn wonders if Muni has any "religious scruples" against the language. It also can be read as a commentary on the global awareness of the sects of people vehemently rejecting the narratives of homogenization and civilization by Anglo-Indian, Anglocentric communities and the missionary since colonialism, with Narayan's liberal linguistic attitude and background. Muni does not shy away from continuing the conversation, fearing that making an escape from what he thinks is authority would only invite trouble. The only English expression he knows is yes and no, said simultaneously. Narayan, while creating humor in the linguistic and cultural clash, makes sure that the object of humor does not have to be Muni in all necessity. It is the American's equal misreading of Muni's gestures that are brought into the story. Narayan legitimizes Muni's reception of the American's language and gestures, with the Narrator giving out reasons behind his assumptions. The American,

with the English language, does not wield much power over Muni, since the story demands that he establish a negotiation with Muni for the horse.

Narayan also establishes humor in the ironical, antithetical dialogism between the characters. When we see Muni waiting for the shopman's attention, he is coughing and sneezing to register his presence, to which the shopman demands "What ails you? You will fly off that seat into the gutter if you sneeze so hard, young man." Muni, whom we know is old, at being called a young man, breaks into laughter, wanting to win the shop man over to get some supplies on credit. The shopman is pleased, having his sense of humor be appreciated. We find that humoring the shopman is a tactic for Muni to come in his good graces and continue to feed off of his supplies on credit. A double discourse is only established when the conversation ensues with multiple meanings, almost parallelly, never quite fully having an absolute converging point. Humor becomes the output of the duality in the discourse and lubricates the friction, glossing over the awkwardness in the clash. With the shopman and Muni, the disruption in humor leads to a disruption in their conversation, proving unfortunate for Muni in his attempt at getting credit. Humor oscillates between Muni and the American, and the disjunct in the cultural meanings in their perceptions of signifiers, on gesture and phonetics is where the duality in their discourses is located by Narayan. Much of their cultural meanings are expressed in their assumptions of what is being said. The class difference, we see, shapes our understandings, perception, reception, and realities, how similar stimuli can stimulate different responses in different people, rubbing the class difference all over the response. Narayan does not place or create his humor in the criticism of his characters. He does not use it to weaponize his narrative or reason against his characters' flaws, or allow the narrator to scrutinize the nativism, the postcolonial subject through a 'tourist gaze' by means of the American's character. The humor is constructed sympathetically, rooted in the day-to-day human experience. While we can always unearth the duality and plurality in the discourses that are laid out, such as the American's ignorance of assuming that he could buy off a statue. It is important to note how his characters are placed in specific locations, propelling a series of assumptions. The American thinks of Muni to be the owner of the statue since he was sitting at the foot of the statue. Muni automatically thinks of the American to be an officer or a soldier because of his khaki clothes – a cultural signifier.

We also find the American exoticizing India as an othered civilization. This exoticization is also what leads him to marvel at the statue, something he thinks is conveniently appropriable. We find him also marveling at Muni's speech, the Tamil language, and Narayan has the narrator call it "stimulating even as pure sound", the American puts on a pleasant expression and says: "I wish I had my tape-recorder here. Your language sounds wonderful, I get a kick out of every word you utter here." He thinks that Muni is able to decipher the turn of the conversation, and asks him to not waste his breath on sales talk, whereas, we have Muni meandering on a different tangent altogether. Both of their expressions are destabilized from the centre. Narayan does not centralize either of their discourses, none of the speeches is given more relevance than the other. Both of the characters try to understand what the other person is saying, and it forms into a cyclical, meta-conversive engagement. Muni talks about the stories, the lores, the activities and images that govern and constitute his life; the town, the temple, the priest, the events that start and end within the town, the folkloric significance of the statue, the myth of a future savior Kalki, whereas the American talks of New York, the Empire State Building, book clubs, elevators and air conditioning, the absence of which makes him feel the need to check out other civilizations, his wife who stayed back in Srinagar, him enjoying chopping wood as a hobby, building fire for his fireplace, et cetera.

The markers of their conversations through sounds and gestures are interspersed with one another. When we find Muni gesturing mincing of meat to hint towards police brutality on convicts, we find the American assume it is him talking about chopping woods. We do find Muni understand the word "coffee" and receive it as "kapi", suggesting the American to try the "kapi-otels" in the next town. There are instances of material and tangible goods smoothening out the duality in their discourses to some extent, such as the American offering Muni a cigarette, which Muni participates in, or when he offers him a hundred-rupee note: "the old man now realized that some financial element was entering their talk." But then we find Muni deviating from the intended function of the gesture and thinking that the American wants to get some change instead. The humor and misunderstandings reach a crescendo with the sale of the statue to the mistaken owner Muni, while Muni is under the assumption that it is his two goats that the American just bought. There is never a full settlement or oneness in much of the dialogic space in the story, even as the American is trying to load the statue on his truck, initially under the assumption that Muni would come back with some help for the American's endeavors, or when the two goats find their way back to Muni's house after he tells his wife about his earning from the American, funnily proving his part of the story wrong. His wife takes it to be an act of theft, especially after

they find the two goats at their doorstep. Muni is left asking the goats themselves about the mistaken ownership, to which his wife declares that she would leave for her parents' place should the police come to investigate the theft. Thus, we find Narayan basing his humor till the very end on the legitimized assumptions of his characters through the double discourse in the story.

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