

An Astrologer's Day -Re-Visited (A Critical Analysis from 21st Century Perspective)

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan's short story "An Astrologer's Day" was first published in 1943 in short story collection titled "Cyclone and other stories". Later on, it was republished in another short story collection "An Astrologer's Day and other stories". In the short story, the writer portrays a day's events in the life of the protagonist, the Astrologer in the imaginary and stereotypical south Indian town of Malgudi, where the standard norms of tradition and superstition apply. The theme of the story is: how an astrologer faces earlier life's deeds in present day. The story deals with darker side of human nature like shrewdness, revengefulness, selfishness and hypocrisy. Human frailties are depicted in the story. In the end, all ends well. Astrologer who has been running from realities of life faces an adverse situation which he did not want to face. He comes across a person who was thought to be dead comes alive before the astrologer. Astrologer is well versed with "working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money and tangles of human ties". The story also exhibits religious mentality, poverty, caste and selfishness of man etc. Setting: The market place. There are three characters in the short story. The Astrologer, Gurunayak and Astrologer's wife. The author skillfully uses Irony in the story. Mysticism and religious hypocrisy, Identity, guilty, fear, Modernization, tradition and inequality are themes seen in the short story. Symbols used by the author are: The astrologer's garb and equipment,

Market place lightening and lorry. Style: Narayan's adopts simple style and language. He uses curious mixture of English and Tamil idioms

Keywords: Astrologer, Guru Nayak, Cowrie shells, Mystical chart, Cheroot, Market place, Fistful of coins.

Introduction

Brief Biography of R. K. Narayan

R.K. Narayan was born in a, well-educated South India family. His father was a school headmaster who constantly traveled, so Narayan spent most of his childhood in the care of his grandmother; she schooled him in mythology, arithmetic, classical music, and Indian languages (the family mostly conversed in English). Narayan completed his bachelor's degree and briefly worked as a school teacher. He quit teaching profession to pursue his dream of becoming a writer. With the help of his family, Narayan wrote several short stories and novels about a fictional Indian town called Malgudi.

He vociferously opposed abusing of students in schools and commented on the imbalance of power between men and women in marriage. Plots of his works consisted auto-biographical experiences, about school children problems, power structure in the family and many more. His writings were rejected by many publishers. It was English novelist Graham Greene who helped him in finding publishers in Europe. Though Narayan's novels were



well-reviewed but his works could not be sold. At 29 Narayan married and took a job as a journalist to support his family. Soon after, his wife died of typhoid five years later. This incident put in deep depression. According to him it took him 15 years to get well-versed in craft of writing. Because of second world war he couldn't publish his works. So, to overcome that he started his own publication: Indian Thought Publication. As on today the publication is taken care of by his grand daughter.

Narayan's prolific writing career spanned over six decades, producing nearly 200 short stories, 10 novels and even wrote screenplay for the Indian feature film Miss Malini (1947). He was appointed to Rajya Sabha for his contribution to literature. He was awarded Padma Vibhushan and Sahitya Academy award. He also received several Nobel Prize nominations. His novel The Guide (1958) was made into a film and adapted by Broadway. He died in 2001.

Analysis of the characters

The Astrologer

The unnamed protagonist of the story, the astrologer is not truly an astrologer, but was forced to take up astrologers' profession due to emergence of sudden adverse circumstances in his life. Every day beneath a tamarind tree in a market he sets his shop, wearing a priest's garb, wrapping in saffron clothing, painting his face sacred ash and vermilion and posing as a holy man with cosmic wisdom. For a small fee, he listens to people's problems for ten minutes and offers them what seems like sage advice, dressing in common sense and manipulations in an astrologist's lingo. Despite having no actual astrological knowledge, he is quite understanding, empathetic and offers comfort to his customers by giving them solace and emotional support

At the end of the story it is known that astrologer fled his village after having a street brawl with Guru Nayak. Astrologer stabs gurunayak and throws him in a well. So, in order to not to get prosecuted he left

the village. He feels that his hand is filled with blood and committed a crime. He feels great load on his chest. The burden is felt not out of pity for Guru Nayak, however out of self—interest. Even when the astrologer meets Guru Nayak, he doesn't feel guilty of the crime he committed. One must appreciate astrologer shrewdness, commonsense and spontaneity in handling his customers. The astrologer is married and blessed with a child. Astrologer reveals his past to his wife only on the day he meets Guru Nayak in the marketplace. He is greedy too. He abuses Guru Nayak for paying him only 12 annas instead of 1 rupee he promised.

An Astrologer's Day textual quote

His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position—placed as they were between the painted forehead and dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks: even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting.

To crown the effect, he wrapped a saffron-colored turban around his head. This color scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park.

Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering crisscross of light rays and moving shadows.

He had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life; and he knew



no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew of what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice, and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labor as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money, and the tangle of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told a person before him gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results of for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him [...] Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for even the mildest of us loves to think he has a forbidding exterior.

"Stop," said the other. "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins." The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied: "All right. I will speak... You were left for dead. Am I right?"

"Ah, tell me more."

"A knife passed through you once?" Said the astrologer.

"Good fellow!" He bared his chest to show the scar. "What else?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead."

"I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well," exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm. "When shall I get at him?" He asked, clenching his fist.

"In the next world," answered the astrologer. "He died four months ago in a far-off town. You will never see any more of him."

Guru Nayak Character Analysis

Guru Nayak was the man whom the astrologer tried to murder several years before the story begun over a drunken street brawl. Guru Nayak is introduced in the story as an aggressive stranger who is searching for a man who tried to kill him few years ago. Guru Nayak wants to strangle the person who harmed him. He left the village in search of the man. He arrives before astrologer to find whereabouts of the person. He exhibits skeptical attitude on astrologer and his wisdom to forecast. Guru Nayak couldn't identify the attacker in the market place who is before him due to darkness of the evening and the paint on his forehead, turban, and long beard that the astrologer wears.

Eventually, he believes that the astrologer is a prophet who tells him the specifics of the person who attacked him and even tells Guru Nayak's name itself. Guru Nayak gets disappointed knowing that the attacker died under the lorry few months before. He feels satisfied to listen from the astrologer the death of the attacker. As a result, he promises to go home and never venture to north of the village. The author narrates Guru Nayak as the antagonist comparing with Astrologer. However, Guru Nayak name in Hindi is "Guru" means teacher or spiritual initiator and "Nayak" means hero.

The Astrologer's Wife Character Analysis

Astrologer's wife is happy to hear that her husband brought home more money than usual from the day's work. She wants to buy



jaggery to prepare sweet for her daughter. Astrologer reveals his past. That he used to live in bad company and gamble, drink and used to pick up fights. One day in a street drunken brawl he stabbed a person and threw him in a near by well. He thought that he had blood on his hand. However, he has seen the person alive feels relieved. And a great load is off his chest. That is the reason he left his village took up the profession of astrologer, married her and settled in the town of Malgudi.

Mysticism and Religion Hypocrisy

In “An Astrologer’s Day” R.K. Narayan narrators the story of a fraudulent astrologer who makes his living by telling astrology to gullible villagers. Although he has no knowledge of astrology, the astrologer exploits his customers’ searching for answers for their day to day problems. Customers hope that they would find solutions, solace and reassurance from astrology. The astrologer is a mere simple man with full of greed, fear and suffering from the woes of marriage, money, and tangled relationships similar to ordinary human beings. The astrologer possesses no insight into astrology. Simultaneously, he is aware that religious mysticism, whether fantasy or real, offers meaning to common people’s sufferings. Though, insignificant it may be.

The astrologer’s appearance, with his garb and equipment, are all designed to create an air of mysticism and power. In the opening of the story, the astrologer’s character is established. He lays out his “professional equipment”: number of cowrie shells, a cloth chart that is incomprehensible but looks like mystical and bundle of ancient writings. The properties help him to peddle the illusion that he is a holy man. But he never tries to tell that he is a holy man.

The astrologer has painted his forehead with sacred ash and wrapped himself in a saffron turban. In Hinduism saffron is symbol of purity and quest for light. The astrologer sits

beneath a large tamarind tree with his equipment. In fact, the author notes, “half the enchantment of the place had to do with the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting”—here, mystically marketplace lacks adequate lighting provided by the government.

The astrologer’s keen insight around marriage, money, or tangled relationships and religious vocabulary mask the fact that he has no astrological wisdom. The astrologer confesses to himself that he had never envisioned to become an astrologer and does not understand the stars or planets nor their astrological consequences better than any other peasant. The story puts forth how people seek mystical solutions to their worldly problems. It is known that it is innate human desire to control worldly problems through astrologer. People like the astrologer, with their shrewdness and keen insight into human psyche of customers are simply giving customers what they wanted.

Identity, guilty and fear

The astrologer is not a real astrologer, but a dubious man. He has fabricated his identity to escape punishment from attempt to murder. His livelihood, marriage and very survival are lies. There is no veracity to them. Narayan uses plot of astrologer to depict ways in which fear and guilt can thrust a man to lead a self-deceiving life.

The astrologer was forced to flee his home after stabbing Guru Nayak in a drunken brawl. In addition to his new profession, his makeup and turban, hide his old identity from others who know him. He disguised himself as a holy man, as customers would not think about his origin, family and name. Whoever believes him do not dare to question his integrity. The author too would not give him a name. Throughout the story he is called “the Astrologer”. Therefore, he escaped from judicial system even after committing a crime. Indeed, when Guru Nayak approached him, he does not identify the face of man he is trying to find to take



revenge. Due to failing light at the end of day, his clothing, and astrologer's equipment, Guru Nayak could not recognize him. Otherwise, he would have killed the astrologer on the spot. Guru Nayak fell for astrologer's verbal jugglery, though he was skeptic about astrology in the beginning.

Modernization, Tradition, and Inequality

In an astrologer's day modernization and technology signify the presence of notebooks, cars and gaslights in the marketplace. All these modern items help people function effortless in today's world. Tradition, religion and culture, often facilitate people to find answers to existential questions. Astrologer in today's world creates an illusion that fate can be known, foretold and controlled.

The astrologer opens his shop daily under the tamarind tree, which is next to road leading to the Town Hall Park. Narayan humorously compares the astrologer sitting under the tree against democracy and modern administration. Despite newfound technology, rapid change in modern society and organization of society, the astrologer still has lively business. As on today, people still seek comfort in astrology to find solutions to their financial and marital problems. People still believe that their bad disposition is due to cosmic events and current position of planets in the sky.

The modern fast pace of development is leaving many people financially behind. The Astrologer with his limited skills is also left behind. As a result, non-gradual technological progress has developed inequality among the public. Within the earshot of the astrologer, cars are driven to work and people are working in well-lit administrative offices. Inequality is further demonstrated by Narayan by describing presence of Jutka along side of honking of cars, in the din of the crowd. And also, the astrologer sits on the edge of the road with other street vendors, he doesn't own a shop. He doesn't have light of his own. He

borrow light from other vendors while sitting in the shelter of a tree to do his business. Modernization has deepened inequality. Tradition and religion connect the social fabric of the country. People's mind set has not changed. Though they adopt modern technology but in their way of life and thinking they remain religious. They do believe in mysticism too.

Symbolism

The Astrologer's Garb and Equipment

The astrologer's garb and equipment—including cowrie shells and mystical looking charts—represent the artificiality of religious practice and, in turn, the ability to take advantage of people's fear of God. The astrologer's costumes and wares exhibit people to believe him unconditionally and not being skeptical. Because of holy nature of appearance, people blindly follow his words. The astrologer's garb portrayed by Narayan, reflects mystics and holy men in India and the position religion holds in the culture.

The greatest sham of the astrologer's garb is that it portrays figure of divinity and purity to the customers. No body questions the integrity of the holy man in India. On the contrary, the astrologer just like any common man is prone to same ills that he identifies with his customers like marriage, problems of money and twisted human affairs. The astrologer's garb, as a symbol reminds the reader that they are all human in character---greedy, selfish, revengeful, as anyone else and petty.

The Marketplace Lights: The market place lights represent the illusion of enlightenment from which astrologer benefits. Customers believe that astrologer possesses cosmic and prophetic intelligence. The fluctuating lights and swaying shadows in the market place represent a mystical, enchanting ambience that supplements false credibility of the astrologer. All the vendors have lights, gas lamps or flares except astrologer who has none. He depends on



other vendors lightening. He starts his business by midday, when the crowd is large and light is enough.

When Guru Nayak arrives in the market place there is a small shaft of light left. Guru Nayak was skeptic about astrologer's prophecy. However, Guru Nayak challenges astrologer to prove his mantle. Later on, Guru Nayak strikes a match to light his cheroot, due to light his face is illuminated. Light originates for the first time from astrologer's place. It is a symbol of an opportunity for the astrologer to accept his crime and undergo punishment. On the contrary, he evades his recognition by Guru Nayak shrewdly.

Irony

In "An Astrologer's Day," irony pervades everywhere through out the story. Narayan skillfully expresses his ironic tale. Nayak was searching for the attacker for many years now, but when he comes across the attacker, he doesn't recognize him when he comes face to face with him. Simultaneously, the astrologer was living with the guilt for killing a man actually he did not kill. The Astrologer was escaping and hiding for a crime he never committed. Irony is clearly visible in the story. Narayan's irony is accepted by the reader therefore it prevents from becoming satire or cynicism. The reader feels happy by the ironic ending. The astrologer is acquitted of murder. He uses his wit and intelligence to convince Nayak that his assailant is dead. The story ends on a happy note. Astrologer goes home and shares what happened few years ago in his life to his wife. He sleeps peacefully thereafter.

Lesson from the story

Lesson to be learned from "An Astrologer's Day" is that there are many indigent and ignorant underprivileged people living every where in the world with hidden talents. If given an opportunity all of them can exhibit their talent and blossom in their

chosen profession. Because, of imaginary crime the astrologer left his village without any pre-meditated plan or thought. Had he continued in the village he would have carried his forefather's profession: tilling the land, living, marrying and living in his ancestral home. But that was not in his fate. The astrologer is quite an interesting and admirable character. He arrives in a big, strange city with out any backing except small sack of clothes. He had no education and specific skill to live upon. But as fate had it, he became an astrologer on an impulse to make a living. Soon he discovered that he has talent for the new profession. As he was "street smart". He acquired a small home, married a woman and had a child. Now his children would grow in the city. Though astrologer didn't have any plan. He impressed his customers with his "professional equipment". He was well—versed and worldly wise. He has gone through life—threatening ordeals to survive. At last, he survived without any plan.

Politics and History

There is criticism on Narayan that he refuses to engross with the political and historical events of his time. Usually, the author gives more importance to ordinary lives of the people who live in Malgudi. The story was published in 1947, the year India gained its independence. But nowhere in the story any such event is discussed.

Relevance of "An Astrologer Day" to this day

Reading the story even after seven decades seems, as if it is written recently. Because, the environment in the marketplace can be found to this day. Though technologically india is developed, in many towns and cities you find those market places, astrologers and people consulting those astrologers to know solutions to the problems. Street vendors are seen to this day and migration from villagers is going to this day. The life

in many towns in India is same to this day. So, the plot of the story seems relevant to this day. The story is timeless. As a result, it remains to be relevant to this day. In these respects, the story is not outdated or archaic. Narayan's stories are enjoyed by readers in 21st century too because his plots and characters are from ordinary lives. Despite of development in several aspects ordinary man's life has not much changed. Villages and towns remained more or less same even after several decades of Independence from foreign power.

Professional Equipment

The astrologer's "professional equipment" is described in the first sentence of the story. ...he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie shells, a square piece of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. Cowrie shells are large sea-snail shells. Some of them are very good-looking. Palmyra writing is an imitation of sacredmystical writing on the leaves of the Palmyra palm tree. It is sure that the astrologer will not be able to read in any language as he is not trained. All the professional equipment of the astrologer is only meant for show and create environment to attract the customers. They create an ambience for astrology.

Style and technique

It is distinctive of Narayan's work in its style and structure but also in theme. The typical appeal of Narayan's stories originates from the tension between their strong emphasis on plot and their extreme brevity. "An Astrologer's Day," like most of Narayan's stories, is very short, less than five pages. Almost all Narayan's stories have a clear dramatic action in which "the central character faces some kind of crisis and either resolves it or lives with it."

The author skillfully narrators the entire story to the reader. The narrator does not reveal all the aspects of characters at the beginning, the entire plot is dependent on the revelation made at the end. The dialogues serve the function of providing different points of view without altering the authority of the narrator.

Narayan's style of writing is simple and adopted consistently through out his works. His style is a mixture of Tamil and English. Syntax and grammar follow English rules. The author uses idioms influenced by Tamil.

Conclusion

It was suspense till the end of the story. When astrologer reaches home and confides with his wife the reasons for his running away from home, married her and settled there. So far, all these years he has been thinking that blood of man was on his hands. When he was young, he was in bad company and always drinking and gambling. One day he was involved in quarreling with a man and stabbed him and threw him in a well. He thought that man was killed but to his surprise the man is seen alive and he spoke to him. Thus, a great load was relieved off his chest.

This was the reason why the astrologer left his village without any plan or preparation. As a result, this was how the astrologer could talk correctly of Guru Nayak's troubled past. Thus story ends with an incredible twist: "a murdered man turns up to consult his "murder", who is now an astrologer, regarding when will he be able to take his revenge; the "murderer" recognizes the "murdered" in the matchlight when the former had lit the cheroot but he couldn't identify his old enemy in the garb of an astrologer. The client is astonished to be told about his past history by the

astrologer and modestly agrees to give up his search for his enemy declared to have been crushed by a lorry four months ago in a nearby town. Thus, convinced that his assailant had been dead under the lorry months ago, Guru Nayak would not dare to venture out of his village as he was warned not to risk his life. Thus, secrecy begins to fall in place and the suspense unfolds into interesting story.

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