

FINE BALANCING OF CHARACTERISATION IN R.K. NARAYAN'S "FORTY-FIVE A MONTH"

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Abstract

Indian novelist and short story writer Raspi Krishnaism (R. K.) Narayan is known for his ability to capture the details of daily life in India and for his insight into the social and cultural issues particular to Indian society. In his short story "Forty-Five a Month," Narayan presents a working-class Indian family. He vividly portrays the financial struggles of the family, and succinctly comments on the effects such monetary issues have on the relationships among the family members. In this story a little girl, Shanta, eagerly anticipates an evening out with her father, Venkat Rao, who has promised to take her to the cinema (movie theater). In the following article, an attempt has been made to explore the ways in which R. K. Narayan contrasts the characters of Shanta and Venkat Rao and their experiences, maintaining that the author heightens the tragedy of "Forty-Five a Month" by juxtaposing Shanta's innocence, trust, and strength with Rao's fears and weaknesses.

Key Words: R.K. Narayan, short story, characterisation.

Indian novelist and short story writer Raspi Krishnaism (R. K.) Narayan is known for his ability to capture the details of daily life in India and for his insight into the social and cultural issues particular to Indian society. In his short story "Forty-Five a Month," Narayan presents a working-class Indian family. He vividly portrays the family's financial struggles and succinctly comments on the effects such monetary issues have on the relationships among the family members. In "Forty-Five a Month," a little girl eagerly anticipates an evening out with her father, who has promised to take her to the cinema (movie theater). The father, however, is chronically overworked. He is prepared to hand in his resignation in order to avoid being asked to work late yet again and miss the chance to fulfill his promise to his daughter. On the evening he is required to work well beyond regular hours yet again, he is also promised a raise. The father remains at work, returning home hours after the time he had arranged to pick up his daughter for the movie. He finds her asleep, dressed to go out. In this short work, Narayan depicts the torment endured by a loving father who is forced to choose between supporting his family and spending time with them, characterizing a commonplace

dilemma of working-class Indian families in the 1940s. The title refers to the amount of money, in rupees (Indian currency), that the father will earn after the raise goes into effect.

The family that is the subject of Narayan's "Forty-Five a Month" is a working-class family. In a working-class family, one or more members of the family earn the money the family needs for basic necessities. Working-class jobs are typically viewed as those that are low-paying, often require long hours, and often involve physical labor. The working class is distinguished from the middle class (or bourgeoisie, as it is often called) in that working-class individuals typically are less educated and earn just enough to secure the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Middle-class individuals typically earn enough to pay for necessities as well as additional luxury or convenience items, or goods or services with educational or entertainment purposes. The Rao family in "Forty-Five a Month" relies on Venkat Rao's meager income from his office job for necessities. From Rao's description of Shanta's life, the family has little extra income for toys and trips to the cinema. Rao describes how hard he works for a small amount of money. Although there is apparently enough money for Rao to consider a rare trip to the cinema, he is clearly desperate to continue drawing his meager income, and he is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his family in order to keep earning his salary. His desperation suggests the family's great need and also implies that the Raos do not, in all likelihood, have money saved on which they could live if Rao sought another job. Rao's predicament reflects Narayan's sympathy for working-class individuals. Regardless of Rao's poignant awareness of the fact that his daughter is essentially growing up without him, he feels compelled by his family's circumstances to continue working for a company that pays him so little and asks for so much in return. It is Rao's awareness of just how much he is sacrificing that makes this particular working-class story so tragic.

Narayan's short fiction in general is often viewed as an insightful exploration of Indian life, and it has been observed that while Narayan explores aspects of the human condition, he does so on a personal level and that he avoids making overt political statements. In particular, Narayan's "Forty-Five a Month" has been regarded as a work in which the author's depiction of the struggle of a father to juggle the demands of providing for his family and enjoying their company is balanced or even outshone by the author's tender and humorous portrayal of the man's daughter, Shanta. However, if Narayan's portrayal of Shanta is understood in terms of Narayan's juxtaposition of Shanta's experiences and those of her father, Venkat Rao, the daughter's characterization no longer appears as the sweet, light, comic element of the story that lifts the tale out of the realm of the depressing and tragic. Rather, Narayan juxtaposes the child's happy, innocent eagerness with the father's succumbing to the numbing necessity of his job. The relationship between the two characters emphasizes the tragedy inherent the story. Narayan's delineation of the child's expectant joy in "Forty-Five a Month" tips the scales of the story toward tragic pessimism and away from the bright optimism of Shanta's

youth, because the contrast between the experiences of Shanta and those of her father is so stark.

“Forty-Five a Month” is neatly divided approximately in half. The first portion of the story is told from the point of view of Shanta, a young schoolgirl, and the second portion of the story is told from the point of view of her father. As the story opens, the reader is introduced to Shanta, who impatiently waits to escape the schoolroom. The tender age of Shanta and her classmates is apparent in the opening scene, as the children are unable to tell the time. Shanta desperately wants to get home before five o’clock, as her father has promised her a trip to the cinema. Her urgency is clear in the number of times she makes reference to the time, and through her actions. She throws her scissors aside rather than laying them on the desk; she runs to the teacher rather than walking or raising her hand. When Shanta tells the teacher her father asked her to leave early, her teacher asks her what time she is supposed to leave. “Now,”¹ Shanta answers, after learning moments before that it was not yet three o’clock.

Narayan endears the child to the reader not only through her eagerness to leave but through her struggle to properly answer her teacher’s question about the time. Two paragraphs and several lines of dialogue – not a small amount of space in such a short story – are used in the humorous relating of Shanta’s attempt to read the clock, as her teacher has instructed. Shanta, upon being asked to tell her teacher what time it is, examines the clock face, “laboriously” counting the numbers she sees, before telling her teacher that it is nine o’clock. The teacher instructs Shanta to look not just at the long hand but at the short one. After announcing that as the short hand is at “two and a half” that the time must be “two and a half,” Shanta returns to her seat, having been informed by her teacher that the time is two forty-five.

Once the exasperated teacher has excused Shanta from class, Shanta runs home, asking her mother whether her father has returned home from work yet. Of course, he has not, but Shanta proceeds to ready herself for her evening out, refusing both her coffee and *tiffin* (lunch, or a light meal). A lengthy paragraph is expended in the relation of Shanta’s readying herself for her outing. Against her mother’s wishes, Shanta selects a lightweight pink dress. She ties a ribbon in her hair, powders her face, and places a vermilion (red) mark on her forehead². Narayan’s characterization of Shanta as incredibly earnest and eager is reinforced in the next small section of the story, when Shanta waits outside for her father until dark. Her conversation with her mother mirrors that which Shanta shared with her teacher. Like Shanta’s teacher, her mother attempts to redirect the child’s attention, but to no avail. Eventually, the determined Shanta takes off down the road, certain she will be able to find her father’s office. She is helped home by a servant from a nearby residence. This is the last information the reader is given from Shanta’s perspective. When she next appears in the story, Shanta is asleep. Narayan has demonstrated in the first half of the story Shanta’s sense

of joyful expectation. The child is intently focused, unable to be turned away from being prepared for her father's arrival by her teacher, her mother, the hot sun, the onset of darkness, or utter fatigue. Shanta, her mother reveals at the end of the story, would barely eat anything and refused to change out of her dress or lie down, for fear of wrinkling her clothes. Against the evidence and past experience, all of which suggest that her father will not make it home in time to take her to the cinema, Shanta believes in her father for the simple reason that he is her father and he made a promise.

In the next half of the story, Narayan depicts Venkat Rao, Shanta's father, as a man desperate to change his life. He has become tired of working all hours for little pay and sacrificing his relationship with his only child in the bargain. Rao is deeply concerned about his daughter's welfare, as evidenced by his comments about her lack of material possessions. Rao characterizes his daughter's life as dull and devoid of entertainment, friends, or pleasure. When he is asked to stay late on the evening of his date with his daughter, Rao dutifully returns to his desk, just as Shanta had returned to her seat when her teacher had told her it was not yet time to go. Rao crafts a rancorous letter in which he insists he has not been purchased "body and soul for forty rupees." (146) He states that he would rather die with his family of starvation than continue being employed in such a manner. He curses his manager, stating his intention to haunt the manager, along with his family, should he, his wife, and his daughter all die of starvation. The letter is indicative of the intensity of Rao's rage and frustration. However, unlike his daughter, Rao does not receive permission to leave. Shanta persists until she is rewarded with the result she has sought – the approved, if irritated, dismissal by her superior. Rao, upon being told he is to be given a five-rupee increment, or raise, returns to his desk and diligently completes his work. While Shanta lives up to her end of the bargain – she is ready by five o'clock just as her father instructed – Rao breaks his promise, unable to persist as effectively as his daughter. Rao's ability to provide for his family is at stake; he is no schoolboy. However, the reader is aware of Shanta's experience, while Rao is not. Just as Shanta is not aware of the dilemma her father faces, so Rao is unaware that Shanta has lived every moment of this day focused on the prospect of an evening with her father. She has overcome her own obstacles and accomplished her goal of not letting her father down. She was ready; her father would have no reason to be angry with her, as he had told her he would be if she were not ready ontime.

Rao is clearly tormented by the decision he has made. His heart breaks when he sees his daughter, asleep and still dressed to go out, when he arrives home after nine o'clock. The reader's heart breaks for Shanta, for her belief in her father, her innocent trust, has been breached. Narayan reveals Shanta's story first. The reader experiences her excitement, her impatience and anticipation. Having witnessed first-hand all the preparations and good intentions and hopefulness wrapped up in Shanta's story, the reader is then thrust into Rao's

tale. His inability to stand up to his manager, to risk the loss of income and to instead be available to his daughter, appear to the reader as graver transgressions than they might have otherwise seemed, had not Shanta's story been told first.

Narayan skillfully crafts his narrative so that Shanta's tale ends right along with the demise of any power she has to control her own situation. She does her part. She is ready on time and she waits. Rao's story opens at a point when he may still shape his fate – he can stay, he can go, he can attempt to reason with his manager. Rao hesitates, though; he fumbles, accepting without a fight the powerlessness that was so forcibly thrust upon Shanta by her age and circumstances. Narayan further contrasts Shanta and Rao by depicting their very different reactions to similar instructions: daughter and father are both told to return to their seats, to keep working. Shanta cannot obey. Rao tries to resist, but he soon retreats to his desk, defeated. By contrasting the characters and their situations, Narayan heightens the story's sense of tragedy. Shanta and the reader are both let down by Rao. Treated first to a depiction of Shanta's own expectations, which are shaped by her youthful innocence, happiness, and trust, the reader's fall from expectation to reality is a harsh, painful one, and Rao's anguish becomes the reader's own. The tragedy the reader experiences is informed by both Shanta's hopes and by Rao's torment.

Notes

1. R. K. Narayan, *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories*. London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1947, pp 141. All the quotations from the story are taken from this edition.
2. This is a type of Hindu ornamentation with spiritual significance. Hinduism is a religion practiced by many people native to India.