

R. K NARAYAN'S A SNAKE IN THE GRASS AND STEPHEN LEACOCK'S WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHER - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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This paper entitled, R. K Narayan's *A Snake in the Grass* and Stephen Leacock's *With the Photographer - A Comparative Study*, aims to accomplish a comparative study of short stories written by Post- colonial writers. "The shortest of short stories may be no more than a page or two in length", says R.J. Rees (P.202). The two chosen writers are R.K Narayan and Stephen Leacock. R. K. Narayan is the best known and most widely read Indian novelist and short story writer in English. Stephen Butler Leacock, Canadian humorist, short story writer, essayist, biographer, and political economist enjoyed enormous popular success with his short stories and sketches. This comparative study further highlights on the theme, irony, narrative style, characters and cultural and traditional background as the two writers vary in their culture and nationalities. *A Snake in the Grass* by R.K. Narayan depicts a family with a problem. Several superstitions or rituals are indicated in the short story. Living in southern India, the Indian people fear and honour the King Cobra. Its bite is deadly. But people almost worship it. The family in the story has a cobra somewhere in their yard. Someone saw it come into the yard, but it has not been found. Narayan finds some humour in this precarious situation which is characteristic of his writing. Stephen Leacock's *With the Photographer* is an adapted screenplay from one of the Stephen Leacock's short stories. The story is about an enthusiastic customer who encounters an annoying photographer at his sixties. The whole story is about the experience of the customer through the process of getting his photograph taken. Indeed an interesting story and this was one reason to choose Stephen Leacock for this comparative study.

Post-colonial literature comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, immigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood. Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory is based on concepts of otherness and resistance. Postcolonial theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* as being the founding work. Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which

writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior.

Short stories were one particular genre which ruled the literary arena amidst all kinds of the theme of oppressions written by post-colonial writers. The short story writers wrote many interesting stories for the readers. All short stories have some common elements. Short stories used to be written as forms of mass entertainment and were reproduced in publications such as newspapers and magazines. The genre of short story enjoys less popularity than it once had. Nonetheless, there are still many wonderful short stories written today. Short stories usually contain these fundamental components as basic elements of a short story. They include plot, setting, characters, theme, point of view as well as good writing.

A plot of a short story contains sub-components such as crisis, conflict, and resolution. A crisis sets up the story and enables all conflict to occur. Conflict portrays either a struggle between opposing forces or a problem to be solved. Conflicts may occur between people, nature, machines. The resolution or denouement is how the conflict is solved. The setting is comprised of the time and the location of the short story. The characters are the actors in the story. An author may choose to reveal the characters in chiefly two ways. Direct characterization involves the author explicitly telling the reader about the character. Most authors use a combination of both direct and indirect characterization. The theme of a story is the central principle around which the story and character revolve. Longer short stories and novel will have multiple themes. However, most short stories develop one or perhaps two themes. Some have suggested that the theme may be described as the 'lesson to be learned' however, it is the best to describe it as the "main idea" or the guiding principle of the story. The point-view describes the reference point of the story. How does the author choose to reveal the story? Through the eyes of the main character or through a bystander? There are usually three points of view -any short story will utilize only one. A first person point of view reveals the thoughts of the main character and involves the use of first person pronouns by the main character. The third person limited view reveals the thought of the main character but from an outsider's perspective. The third person omniscient view reveals the thoughts of any character the author chooses. Good short story writing will include engaging dialogue, sensory descriptions, vivid action, as well as a tightly woven narrative. The methodology of this study is basically comparative. Comparative literature is basically the study of the similarities and differences in the context of space and time. As K.chellappan states,

“Comparative Literature was a study of literature independent of ethnic Linguistic and geographical boundaries has been a liberating and Humanizing force on literature itself by breaking the boundaries and Literary events... It has provided a wider perspective by making the mutual illumination of literature possible ”. (K.Chellappan 1)

In contemporary literary theory, the emphasis is given on inter- textually, which enhances the importance of comparative literature. The French school of comparative literature saw the relationship between literature as one of the contacts between genetically or casually connected works of art. The American school as propounded by Remark accommodates studies of parallels in texts, which are separate by meaning of selective affinities in theme, problem, genre, style and simultaneousness. The term ‘Comparative Literature’ is difficult to define for it evolves not one but two or even more than two literature in comparison at the same time. It becomes still more difficult task when the comparatist has to take into consideration the multi-dimensional aspects of comparative literature such as linguistic, cultural, religious, economic, social and historical factors of different societies. In order to understand the term “Comparative Literature,” one must analyze its nomenclature. Etymologically, the term comparative literature denotes any literary work or works when compared with any other literary work or works. Hence, comparative literature is the study of inter-relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works or literature. It is essential that while making comparative study one must take the sources, themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies, social and religious movements and trends into consideration. The comparatist with his critical approach and investigations will find out, the similarities and dissimilarities among various works that he has undertaken for the purpose of comparison and justification lie in the fact that his approach must be unbiased and unprejudiced to reach the ultimate truth. It is only his earnest and sincere approach which will bring forth the naked truth or natural results and this really is the purpose of comparative study.

Taken broadly, comparative literature is a comprehensive term. Its scope encompasses the totality of human experiences into its embrace, and thus all internal human relationships among the various parts of the world are realized, through the critical approach to literature under comparative study. It helps to peter out the narrow national and international boundaries, and in place of that universality of human relationships emerges out. Thus the term comparative literature includes a comparative study of regional literature, national literature, and international literature. However, there are many overlapping terms in this concern such as- Universal literature, General Literature, International Literature and World Literature. The simple way to define comparative literature is to say that it is a comparison between the two kinds of literature. Comparative Literature analyses the similarities and dissimilarities and parallels between two kinds

of literature. Tagore refers to comparative literature by the name of 'Vishvasahita'. Broadening the scope of comparative literature he remarks:

“From narrow provincialism, we must free ourselves, we must strive to see the works of each author as a whole ,that whole as a part of man’s universal Creativity and that universal spirit in its manifestation through world literature” (Quoted in Buddhadeva Bose, “*Comparative Literature in India,*” *Contribution to Comparative Literature; Germany and India, Calcutta, 1973*)

If taken historically, comparative literature has been a result of a reaction against the narrow nationalism of the 19th-century scholarship in England. Though it was an occasional tradition, the comparative study of literary works was in vogue, right from the beginning of the Christian era .Romans were the pioneers in the field of comparative study. They out did the Greeks in the development of the comparative study. The Romans worked out the tradition of comparing the works of great orators and poets of Greek and Roman and found out many similarities among their studies of literary works. No doubt, Quintillion was the pioneer in this concern, but Longinus endeavored to set the comparative study in systematized discipline. If he had preceded Quintillion he would have been the pioneer in this field. He brought forth the names of Homer and Plato etc. In Indian comparative approach the Sanskrit critics emerged out during the 6th century A.D. It is clear from the commentaries on Kalidasa’s *Meghduta* and *Abhijjanasakutala* .After that, the critics like Kuntaka and Abhinavagupta with their qualitative approach paved the way for modern comparators.

The genre has been an important element of comparative literature curriculum. Ferdinand Bruntiere was the first showing deep interest is the evolution of the genre .According to him, every literary type has a birth, hay day and its wane. The term themes literally interpreted would include various thematological categories such as motif, recurrent images etc. The study of themes may also take into account ‘associations ‘of all types governed and directed by a variety of psychological and cultural factors which establish rules and patterns for them. Moreover, Hudson is of the view that the comparative method will be of great service when it will deal literature historically. After his return to Russia in 1870, Alexander Veselovsky brought out a series of studies on the migration of themes, ranging all over the western and eastern world. Similarly, Richard Price, in his preface to the new edition of Warton’s *History of English Poetry*(1824)regarded literature as a huge treasure house of themes which spread , multiply and migrate. French scholars also collected evidence about literary relations and migrations of themes and motives all over the world. The two other important aspects of comparative literature are literary criticism and translation. Criticism is an important factor in the field of comparative study. Criticism of literary work does not mean to find out its weakness or shortcomings only. Critics should highly eulogize the good qualities of the work

if discovered. To Renan-The comparative method is a “grand instrument of criticism” (*L’Avenir de la science*)(Paris, 1890 p.269).

In comparative studies, translation has a significant place. Translations are valuable in bringing about similarities and dissimilarities between significant works of literature and are very helpful in the field of research. Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* is an important point to be considered. The translation should be as close to the original work as possible. Only and only then, it is possible to understand and evaluate the original literary work. Translation can be used as a tool for comparative study. English translation of European classics will help Indian students to make their comparisons with Indian literature. Similarly, Indian classics in English translation will be helpful for European students in a comparative study with their own literature. Thus translation helps the students of comparative literature to develop an international approach in different spheres such as literary, economic, social, philosophical, religious, cultural, historical and artistic values. Translation is of paramount importance in comparative studies of world literature as well as regional literature. Without successful translation, the comparative approach will miscarry. Moreover, the comparatist who compares two literary works written in two different languages must be bi-lingual as well as successful translator.

Stephen Leacock is better known to the common reader as a writer of humorous skits than as a professor economy. He can be subtle; he can also be boisterous. He can also see the serious, near-tragic aspect of even an apparently comic situation. *With the Photographer* describes an experience with the photographer at his sixties-the fuss he makes to the author who comes to his studio for taking his photograph. The photographer comments on his features. Though the story moves humorously it ends up with horror and the pity.

‘*A Snake in the Grass*’ is an interesting short story by R.K.Narayan. It is full of humor and irony. R.K.Narayan’s novels and stories are set in Malgudi, an imaginary town in south India. Their regional flavor adds to their realism and picturesqueness. The victims might appear to be clever, but they were really gullible. It contains some satire on certain aspects of Indian life. On a sunny afternoon, when the inmates of the Bungalow were at their rest a cyclist rang his bell at the gate and inform them that a cobra had got into their compound. “A cyclist rang his bell at the gate frantically and announced: ‘A big cobra has got into your compound. It crossed my wheel’. He pointed to its track under the gate, and resumed his journey.”(Pg.25 ASG)

In the bungalow a mother and her four sons were living. The old servant Dasa was also living there and he was sleeping in the shed .They rouse him from the sleep and tell about the arrival of cobra “The servant Dasa was sleeping in the shed .They shook him out of his sleep and announced him the arrival of the cobra. ‘There is no cobra ‘, he replied and tried to dismiss the matter.” (Pg.25 ASG) .They scolded him for not keeping the

garden clean and said that if he did not catch the cobra before the evening he shall be dismissed. Dasa complained that he was not provided with a grass-cutter. “They said ‘The thing is somewhere here. If it is not found before evening, we will dismiss you... They looked accusingly at Dasa:’ You have the laziest servant on earth’, some neighbours said.’ He ought to keep the surroundings tidy.’ ‘I have been asked for a grass-cutter for months”, Dasa said. (Pg.25 ASG)

People gathered around each one giving their own opinion and suggestion. A college boy said, “I read in an American paper that 30,000 people die of snakebite every year”(pg.26 ASG). The mother who is afraid nearly screams out of fear on hearing it. Few people standing there take sticks, knives, and crowbars and cut down creepers, bushes and lawns were laid low. But the snake was not found. “Creepers, bushes, and lawns were laid low. What could not be trimmed was cut to the root. The inner walls of the house brightened with the unobstructed glare streaming in. When there was nothing more to be done Dasa asked triumphantly, ‘Where is the snake?’.”(Pg.26 ASG)

An old beggar cried for alms at the gate. They told her not to disturb when they were on a snake hunt. On hearing it the old woman beggar became happy and said “You are fortunate. It is god Subramanya who has come to visit you. Don’t kill the snake”. The Mother who is happy to hear it and says, “You are right. I forgot all about the promised *Abhishekam*. This is a reminder.”(Pg.26 ASG). She gives a coin to the beggar, who promises to send a snake- charmer. An old man came and announced himself as a snake-charmer. They all gathered and talked about the snake. Then he looked helplessly and says, “If you show me the snake, I’ll at once catch it. Otherwise, what can I do? The moment you see it again, send for me. I live nearby’. He gave his name and address and departed”. (Pg.26 ASG)

At five in the evening, they all become very tired of cutting down every bush and taking rest in the veranda and discussing their future protection against reptiles. When Dasa appeared before them carrying a water-pot whose mouth was sealed with a slab of stone all were curious to know what he really had in the pot. He puts down and says, “I have caught him in this. I saw him peeping out of it ... I saw him before he could see me” (pg.27 ASG). He explains about catching and sealing up the snake in the pot. The crowd stand at a safe distance and gazed on the pot. The people in the house called Dasa as the laziest servant in the earth. But now he has a glow of a champion on his face and said: “Don’t call me an idler hereafter” (pg.27 ASG).Mother praises Dasa for catching the snake. Then Dasa goes away with the pot, to hand it over to the snake- charmer. He becomes the hero of the day. People watch him in great admiration and decided to reward him.

Five minutes later, youngest son cries, “See there!’ out of a hole in the compound wall a cobra emerged. It glided along towards the gate, paused for a moment to look at

the gathering in the veranda with its hood half- open. It crawled under the gate and disappeared along with a drain'. All of them in shock and said 'Does it mean that there are two snakes here? The college boy murmured: 'I wish I had taken the risk and knocked the water- pot from Dasa's hand; we might have known what it contained" (pg.27 ASG).

Thus Narayan makes an interesting story out of an ordinary incident. He reveals human psychology and the blind belief of orthodox Indians. The victims might appear to be clever, but they were really gullible.

Stephen Leacock is better known to the common reader as a writer of humorous skits than as a professor of political economy. In this short story, he describes his bitter experience with the photographer of the fifties and sixties. One day, Stephen Leacock goes to a studio for taking a photograph. He describes the photographer as, "The photographer was drooping man in a gray suit, with the dim eye of a natural scientist" (pg.55 WP). He took Leacock into an inner room after an hour's waiting. Leacock sat on a stool under a beam of filtered sunlight. The photographer rolled a camera box into the middle of the room. He puts his head into the box and covers it with a black cloth. The photographer then adjusts the camera with much effort. Then he looks at Leacock and makes some unpleasant remarks on his face. He twists his face for a perfect angle. He does not like the appearance of Leacock's head. The narrator puts forth thus, "He came over and took my head in his hands and twisted it sideways. I thought he meant to kiss me, and I closed my eyes. But I was wrong'."(Pg.56 WP). Then he gave a lot of instructions to Leacock. He directed him to open his mouth drop the ears, roll the eyes, expand the lungs, hump the neck, turn the face this way or that way etc. Leacock gets irritated and says, "This face is my face. It is not yours; it is mine. I've lived with it for forty years and I know its faults. I know it's out of drawing ; I know it wasn't made for me; but it's my face- the only one I have '- I was conscious of a break in my voice, but I went on-such s it is, I've learned to love it. And this is my mouth, not yours. These ears are mine and if your machine is too narrow'."(Pg.56-57 WP) He rose from his seat.

Suddenly the photographer captures Leacock features just in a moment of animation. When Leacock asks for his photograph the photographer says, 'I have to develop the negative first. Come back on Saturday, and I'll let you see a proof of it'. On Saturday he goes back to the studio to collect his photo. The photographer shows the proof of a large photograph and they both look at in silence. Leacock is totally dumbfounded to see his photo and asks him, 'Is it me?', that eyes and eyebrows are not mine". He looked quite different from his real figure. The photographer proudly told him about his art of 'retouching- changing and improving his features, so that photo could come out well. But his photo looked like somebody else. It was a big shock to Leacock. He was worried as for how could give his friends a copy of that picture so that they could remember him even after his death.

The narrator says, “I came here for a photograph, a picture, something which bad though it seems would have looked like me. It wanted something that would depict my face as Heaven gave it to me, humble though the gift may have been. I wanted something that my friends might keep after my death, to reconcile them to my loss.”(Pg.58 WP). He shouts angrily at the photographer. He throws away the photograph and walks home in disgust. The chosen two short stories *The Snake in the Grass* and *With the Photographer* for the Comparative study are the most famous and popular short stories of R.K Narayan and Stephen Leacock. The wit, humour, choice of characters, theme, and irony in the stories cannot be ignored. Its marvelous bizarreness is especially an important point to mention. The story of *The Snake in the Grass* is different from Leacock’s *With the Photographer* as the former writer often twists the streamline of his story with his narrative style, settings, theme and characters who are mostly common people influenced by Indian tradition , culture, and religious beliefs. *With the Photographer* is fundamentally a realistic experience of the narrator. The settings of the two stories vary. *With the Photographer* revolves inside a photo studio with just two characters the narrator and the photographer. The narrator is the protagonist who finds himself in a miserable situation with an old photographer who thinks the narrator’s appearance is not what one would call as an attractive face as per his photographic experience and for his camera lens. In *The Snake in the Grass*, the story takes place inside a compound of a house with more than five characters. Symbol and irony play a vital role in these two short stories. Snake stands as a typical Indian symbol of religious faith and tradition. In India, the Hindus worship “Snake” as God and will never kill a snake even if it bites human beings. Instead, the cobra is worshiped and people give eggs and milk at *Naga* temples as a sort of religious offerings. Whereas in other countries a snake is considered as a mere “reptile”.

The story ‘*A Snake in the Grass*’ is a typical saga of the Indian middle-class family. Most of his stories deal with different characters of people. The author has made many shoddy affairs anew with a master hand so that the reader never feel uneasy repeatedly reading. His love for nature and friendship with the green world is hailed highly. In every story, the author has added regional flavours to ramify its realism and picturesqueness. In this regard what is more significant is his strong insight into the realistic class theory. Especially he deals with the minds of the typical middle-class citizens of Madras or Mysore. He has equated their environment of petty scoundrels who are out to cheat them. Narayan writes about real experience found in his native India. His stories are filled with humorous anecdotes and irony.

The camera in the short story, *With the Photographer* symbolizes life as the picture shot in it stands the test of time. The person in the photograph is remembered forever, even after his death. When the narrator wanted his photo to be taken, the photographer after too many shots and corrections takes a photograph of the narrator, who finally gets

dejected and upset seeing his face being totally altered and corrected by the photographer. The developed photo does not even have the slightest match who in turn feels like a new man in the photo with different eyes, cheeks, and nose. He feels that he has been cheated by him. Stephen Leacock is a Canadian writer; in his short story *With the Photographer*, he narrates the western way of lifestyle. The western culture is defined by the idiosyncratic cultural norms of England and the English people. Owing to England's influential position within the United Kingdom it can sometimes be difficult to differentiate English culture from the culture of the United Kingdom as a whole. In the English country, the people give importance to the photographs. The photo gives them the memory of that day's happiness and it stands as a proof how they lived in the past and also gives a vision to their generations to see their lifestyle and manners. In this story, his photograph was very important to the author; as he wishes to give it to his friends who can preserve it and remember him even after his death. However, his story ends up where he completely loses his control and patience and is at the height of his anger shouts at him for that photo and walks out without taking it. In India, there are villages even today where people believe that taking a photograph will shorten their life span or even cause untimely death.

Short stories are meant for entertainment and the two short stories chosen for the present study clearly reveals the fact which has all the essential features of a short story. R. K Narayan and Stephen Leacock though vary in nationality, language, culture, tradition and background, are similar in their thoughts and idea on the common beliefs and faith of men in general. It may be about superstitious beliefs, faith in religious customs and practices, irony or Indianans in R.K Narayan for Stephen Leacock his faith and belief lies in a real photograph, fails to understand that any photograph taken is unreal but only an image of the real. He fails to come out of his illusion to reality. Snake and the Camera are the central ideas of the short stories. Both writers a greatly influenced by the real situations and the short stories taken for the study has a touch of reality in them. The short stories compared have serious themes, loss, and gain, obsessions in life and art. To conclude both R.K Narayan and Stephen Leacock are undoubtedly the most noteworthy short story writers in English whose works reflect a noticeable satirical element - a fine line between hilarity and absurdity.

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