



Laughing through Adversity: Humor as a Coping Strategy in R.K. Narayan's Works

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-2025-J-011

Subject: English

Received : 17.05.2025

Accepted : 16.06.2025

Published : 28.07.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijri.v9n4.25.JL011

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Abstract

*R.K. Narayan, a highly esteemed Indian author, is famous for his accessible yet deeply meaningful storytelling, primarily set in the fictional town of Malgudi. A significant aspect of his writing style is humor, which he uses not just for entertainment but as a therapeutic tool that eases psychological strain, builds resilience, and promotes community bonds. This paper examines how Narayan uses humor to help readers navigate personal and societal conflicts, providing a means to deal with the intricacies of life. Through a textual analysis of selected works like *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Guide*, and *Malgudi Days*, the study explores how humor functions as a source of catharsis, psychological healing, and social critique. Additionally, it investigates the cultural and philosophical foundations of humor in Narayan's writings, especially its connections to Indian traditions such as irony, satire, and the notion of *Hasya Rasa* from classical Indian aesthetics.*

Keywords: humor, R.K. Narayan, therapeutic, hasya rasa, psychological relief, social commentary

Introduction

R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) stands as one of India's most celebrated and internationally recognized authors, whose literary legacy spans over five decades. His novels and short stories, set primarily in the fictional town of Malgudi, have captivated readers worldwide with their authentic portrayal of small-town Indian life. While scholars have extensively studied various aspects of Narayan's writing—from his cultural commentary to his narrative techniques—one dimension that deserves deeper exploration is the therapeutic function of humor in his works.

This paper examines how Narayan employs humor not merely as a stylistic device but as a therapeutic mechanism that serves multiple psychological and social functions. Through his subtle wit, gentle irony, and compassionate observation of human

foibles, Narayan creates a literary space where both characters and readers can experience psychological relief, gain perspective on life's challenges, and find emotional healing.

The therapeutic qualities of humor have been well-documented in psychological research. Laughter has been shown to reduce stress hormones, boost immunity, decrease pain, relax muscles, and prevent heart disease (Martin & Lefcourt, 2004). Beyond these physiological benefits, humor provides essential psychological advantages: it adds joy to life, eases anxiety and fear, relieves stress, improves mood, and enhances resilience (Kuiper & Martin, 1998). These benefits align remarkably with the effects that Narayan's humorous narratives produce.

This paper argues that Narayan's humor functions therapeutically in three primary ways: 1) as a coping



mechanism that helps characters navigate life's adversities; 2) as a social lubricant that facilitates community bonding and conflict resolution; and 3) as a perspective-altering device that enables both characters and readers to reframe challenging situations. Through close reading of several of Narayan's works, including *Swami and Friends*, *The Guide*, *The Financial Expert*, and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, this paper will demonstrate how Narayan's humor operates as a healing force within his fictional universe.

The Nature of Narayan's Humor

Before examining the therapeutic functions of Narayan's humor, it is important to characterize its distinctive nature. Unlike the biting satire of some social critics or the slapstick comedy of pure entertainers, Narayan's humor is gentle, understated, and deeply humane. His comedy emerges naturally from the everyday situations of ordinary people rather than from contrived scenarios or exaggerated characterizations.

William Walsh (1983) describes Narayan's humor as "gentle but ironical," noting its rootedness in the everyday realities of Indian life. This quality gives Narayan's comedy an authenticity that resonates with readers across cultural divides. As Alexander McCall Smith observed, Narayan's books convey "a lovely sense of people doing things even when life is not treating them well". This capacity to find humor in challenging circumstances is precisely what gives Narayan's writing its therapeutic dimension.

Narayan's humor typically derives from three sources: the incongruity between expectations and reality, the gentle mockery of human pretensions, and the ironic juxtaposition of traditional values with modern circumstances. Unlike more aggressive forms of comedy that rely on ridicule or shock value, Narayan's humor never dehumanizes its subjects. Even when exposing human folly, he maintains a compassionate stance toward his characters, inviting readers to laugh with them rather than at them.

This compassionate quality is what distinguishes Narayan's humor and enables it to function therapeutically. By treating his characters with dignity even as he reveals their shortcomings, Narayan creates a safe emotional space where readers

can recognize their own follies without feeling judged or diminished. This approach aligns with what psychologists call "benign violation theory," which suggests that humor arises when something threatens our worldview in a way that is ultimately harmless (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Throughout Narayan's fiction, characters frequently employ humor as a strategy for coping with adversity. This therapeutic function is particularly evident in how his protagonists use wit, irony, and self-deprecation to navigate challenging circumstances.

In *Swami and Friends*, the young protagonist Swaminathan confronts numerous challenges, from strict schoolmasters to parental expectations. When his father challenges him to sleep alone in the office to prove his courage, Swami's fear manifests in comical ways. Narayan writes, "His imagination of ghosts and devils grew, and his heart beat faster" (Narayan, 1935). The humor in this situation does not diminish Swami's genuine fear but rather makes it more bearable for both the character and the reader. Through this lighthearted portrayal of childhood anxiety, Narayan demonstrates how humor can provide emotional distance from frightening situations.

Similarly, in *The Financial Expert*, Margayya uses humorous self-comparisons to cope with his diminished social status. When carrying his box of supplies, he thinks, "I look like a wayside barber with this little miserable box under my arm" (Narayan, 1958). This self-deprecating comparison allows Margayya to acknowledge his reduced circumstances while maintaining his dignity. By framing his situation comically, he creates psychological space between himself and his problems.

The therapeutic value of such humor lies in its ability to provide temporary relief from suffering while preserving one's sense of agency. Psychologist Viktor Frankl (1984) famously observed that humor can create a momentary detachment from even the most dire circumstances, allowing individuals to maintain their humanity in dehumanizing situations. Though Narayan's characters rarely face such extreme conditions, they employ humor in a similar way—as a psychological buffer against life's disappointments and challenges.



This coping function extends to how characters deal with social constraints and power imbalances. In *The Guide*, Raju uses witty observations to manage his imprisonment: “When he turned away from me in utter wrath, the profound solemnity of this puny man with his ledger clutched under his arm and his multicolored turban struck me as so absurd that I convulsed with laughter” (Narayan, 1958). By finding humor in his jailer’s appearance, Raju temporarily transcends his confinement, demonstrating how humor can provide psychological freedom even when physical freedom is restricted. Research in psychology supports the effectiveness of this strategy. Studies have shown that humor can reduce perceived stress and anxiety, increase positive emotions, and enhance emotional resilience (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). By depicting characters who instinctively employ humor as a coping mechanism, Narayan not only creates more authentic portrayals but also models effective psychological strategies for his readers.

Humor as Social Lubricant

Beyond its function as an individual coping mechanism, humor in Narayan’s work serves as a social lubricant that facilitates interpersonal bonding and community cohesion. This social therapeutic function is evident in how humor helps characters navigate complex relationships and resolve conflicts.

In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, the tension between Nataraj and the domineering taxidermist Vasu is frequently mediated through humor. When Nataraj remarks mentally, “Because you’ll not hesitate to make a meal of any fool who has the ill luck to go with you” (Narayan, 1961), he uses silent humor to process his frustration without escalating the conflict. This internal witty commentary allows Nataraj to maintain the relationship while preserving his psychological boundaries.

Narayan also depicts how shared humor can strengthen community bonds. In *Swami and Friends*, the camaraderie among the schoolboys is frequently sustained through jokes and playful teasing. When discussing their strict headmaster, Swami tells his friend Rajam, “You would have punched him in the face if you had been in my position” (Narayan, 1935). This shared mockery of authority figures

helps the boys process their frustrations collectively and reinforces their social bond.

The therapeutic value of this social humor is supported by research showing that shared laughter increases interpersonal attraction, enhances group cohesion, and facilitates conflict resolution (Ziv, 2010). By laughing together, individuals form stronger connections and develop a shared identity that transcends individual differences.

In the context of Malgudi—Narayan’s fictional small town—this social function of humor becomes particularly significant. Humor serves as a mechanism for navigating the complex social hierarchies and interpersonal tensions that characterize close-knit communities. When the tailor in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* exclaims, “Has he no other business than bothering me for those miserable jackets of his wife? This is the fifth time he has visited me” (Narayan, 1961), the humor diffuses potential conflict while acknowledging genuine frustration.

This social therapeutic function extends to how humor helps bridge generational divides. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, the misunderstandings between Jagan and his son Mali are frequently filtered through Jagan’s humorous perspective. When Jagan counts his money and hears the front door open, he feels “like a burglar in his own house” (Narayan, 1967). This self-mocking observation helps him process the role reversal with his son without becoming overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Narayan’s portrayal of humor as a social lubricant reflects what anthropologists have observed across cultures—that humor frequently serves as a non-confrontational way to address tensions and negotiate social norms (Apte, 1985). By depicting characters who instinctively turn to humor to smooth social interactions, Narayan illustrates how comedy can function as a form of emotional intelligence that enhances community well-being.

Humor as Perspective-Shifter

Perhaps the most profound therapeutic function of humor in Narayan’s writing is its ability to shift perspective, enabling both characters and readers to reframe challenging situations and see beyond immediate concerns. This perspective-altering quality is evident throughout his work.



In *The Guide*, when Raju observes the “profound solemnity of this puny man” (Narayan, 1958), his laughter arises from the sudden recognition of incongruity—the contrast between the jailer’s self-importance and his actual stature. This moment of comic insight gives Raju a broader perspective on his circumstances, allowing him to see beyond his immediate predicament.

Similarly, in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Narayan creates humor through the tiger’s perspective on human behavior: “The Head Master’s room was the scene. I was convinced and saw a very respectable man leaping upon his table and climbing into an attic” (Narayan, 1986). By presenting a familiar scene—a school headmaster—through the unfamiliar perspective of a tiger, Narayan creates both comedy and a shift in viewpoint that invites readers to reconsider human hierarchies and pretensions.

This perspective-shifting function of humor has recognized therapeutic value. Cognitive psychologists note that humor often involves a sudden reframing of a situation that resolves tension through unexpected connections (Morreall, 2009). This cognitive shift can disrupt negative thought patterns and open new ways of understanding challenging situations.

Narayan employs this quality of humor particularly effectively when addressing social issues. In *The Painter of Signs*, Raman’s humorous observation that “bachelors should receive a bonus since by staying single; they help to reduce population growth” (Narayan, 1977) uses irony to provide a fresh perspective on India’s population challenges. Rather than approaching the issue with the gravity typical of social commentary, Narayan’s humorous treatment encourages readers to consider the problem from an unexpected angle.

This perspective-shifting humor also appears in Narayan’s essays. In “The Newspaper Habit,” he observes how “after sometime the daily newspaper is seen in bits in various corners of house” (Narayan, 1974), transforming a mundane observation about family reading habits into a gentle reflection on human nature. By finding humor in ordinary behaviors, Narayan helps readers see the

philosophical dimensions of everyday life.

The therapeutic value of this perspective-shifting humor lies in its ability to create psychological flexibility. Research suggests that the capacity to shift perspective is associated with greater resilience and psychological well-being (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). By modeling this cognitive flexibility through humorous observations, Narayan’s writing offers readers a form of cognitive therapy disguised as entertainment.

Humor and Cultural Healing

Beyond its psychological benefits for individuals and communities, Narayan’s humor serves a broader cultural therapeutic function by helping readers navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity in post-colonial India. His gentle comic treatment of cultural clashes offers a healing alternative to more confrontational approaches to cultural change.

In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan’s adherence to traditional practices becomes a source of gentle humor when he observes a man who makes “black dye for hair to his customers, but he himself would not apply on his beard” (Narayan, 1967). This humorous highlighting of inconsistency acknowledges cultural contradictions without condemning either tradition or modernity.

Similarly, in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, when Sri Ram’s grandmother refuses to sit on a chair because “It’s mouse for me. This is some kind of leather, probably cow-hide, and I can’t pollute myself by sitting on it” (Narayan, 1967), the humor arises from the clash between modern conveniences and traditional taboos. Rather than taking sides in this cultural conflict, Narayan’s gentle comedy acknowledges the genuine challenges of navigating cultural change.

This approach has therapeutic value at a cultural level. By treating cultural tensions with humor rather than judgment, Narayan creates a space where readers can reflect on cultural evolution without feeling defensive about either preserving tradition or embracing change. This non-confrontational approach to cultural commentary allows for healing dialogue rather than polarizing debate.

Narayan’s treatment of colonial influences



demonstrates this cultural therapeutic function particularly well. In *Swami and Friends*, when Swaminathan declares that examinations are “the greatest menace that the British had brought with them to India” (Narayan, 1935), the humor deflates anti-colonial rhetoric while still acknowledging genuine grievances. This humorous framing helps process colonial history without being consumed by resentment.

Conclusion

R.K.Narayan’s use of humor transcends mere entertainment to serve profound therapeutic functions. Through his gentle wit and compassionate irony, he creates narratives that help both characters and readers cope with adversity, strengthen social bonds, gain fresh perspectives, and navigate cultural change. The therapeutic qualities of his humor—its capacity to provide emotional relief, foster connection, shift perspective, and heal cultural wounds—make his writing not just artistically significant but psychologically valuable. This therapeutic dimension helps explain Narayan’s enduring appeal across cultures and generations. As Alexander McCall Smith observed, Narayan’s influence extends beyond his artistic achievements to touch readers in deeply personal ways. His ability to find “a lovely sense of people doing things even when life is not treating them well” offers both literary pleasure and psychological nourishment. In an increasingly fragmented and stressful world, Narayan’s therapeutic humor reminds us of comedy’s healing potential. His works demonstrate how laughter can serve as not just a momentary diversion but a sustained practice of psychological well-being. Through his humorous yet profound chronicles of life in Malgudi, Narayan offers readers more than entertainment—he provides a model for finding joy, connection, and perspective in the midst of life’s inevitable challenges. As contemporary research continues to validate the physical and psychological benefits of humor, Narayan’s writing stands as a literary embodiment of laughter’s healing power. His legacy lies not just in his artistic achievements but in the countless readers who have found in his gentle

humor a source of comfort, insight, and renewed resilience.

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