

Can you use this style in other contexts? With R.K. Narayan

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Abstract. This paper argues against a thesis that Shashi Tharoor seems to accept: that R.K. Narayan's style is bound up with a very specific context, of people left behind by the times in South India. It cannot deal with other subject matter. I present a little fiction to challenge the thesis.

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Is it complement or is it mean:

Tharoor dressed up as Sarah Green?

Reading a very critical article from 2001 by Shashi Tharoor on R.K. Narayan, I find it natural to interpret him as committed to a thesis: that the accessible style of Narayan can only deal with some content, chiefly left behind people (and animals) of South India. Here are some quotations from Tharoor:

- (a) "Narayan wrote of, and from, the mindset of the small-town South Indian Brahmin, and did not seem capable of a greater range."

(b) “At its worst, Narayan’s prose was like the bullock-cart: a vehicle that can move only in one gear, is unable to turn, accelerate or reverse, and remains yoked to traditional creatures who have long since been overtaken but know no better.”

I suspect if Tharoor travelled back in time, he would feel “These people are similar to ones from Narayan’s fictions,” and forward too. In what sense are they left behind then? They remain part of the world. Perhaps they are somewhat different in different ages, but I think the style can still absorb them or the changes required are fractional. That is one response to Tharoor. (Maybe he is very sensitive about these things though: “That is a massive change you have introduced with a semicolon there!”)

Probably there is something right about the claim that it is hard to deal with some matters using this style, but it is not that difficult to use it in England, even when dealing with highly educated parts of English society. (I was imagining moving backwards and forwards in South India before, so I suppose this counts as a second response.) Here is a fiction fragment...

The minor philosopher had seen the news on both the gossip websites: Merrick Marrfit, the greatest ethicist in the world, had died. The mutton roll was extremely spicy, interrupting his contemplation of this event. The first thought that occurred to him was “We are all moving up a rank then.” It was a logical consequence surely, but not a very decent thought, though he was confident he was not the only reader guilty of it. A second thought, or a later one, was “They’re going to blame me for this.” Yes, they would blame him, for it was but a month ago that he had gone to see Marrfit, looking in a state of rosy health, give a lecture in Oxford, the last lecture the distinguished philosopher would ever give.

Staying at a relative's house near the historic university city, he was not sure whether to go, then at the last minute he had boarded a bus. It wound its way through the English countryside, picking up old and young. Well, it was mostly old women but there was a stocky English boy wearing large headphones who sat towards the back, in his late teens or early twenties. Music blared from the device. The minor philosopher tried to ignore it, staring out the window. He was seated towards the middle of the single-decker vehicle which ricketed along the poorly paved roads.

“Oh for God's sake,” said a woman behind him, unable to maintain stiff upper lip.

Should he get up and go over to the fellow and have a word about travel etiquette, the ungentlemanly Englishman, the less famous token of the type? What if it descends into a fight, a fight in the constrained space of the bus? He had witnessed one close-up while on one of London's red buses...

(See: the fiction fragment manages to capture inferences from the news following the death of Merrick Marrfit!)

Reference

Tharoor, S. 2001. Comedies of Suffering. *The Hindu* July 8th 2001.