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Unveiling R K Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*: A Treasure of Wit and Wisdom

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Abstract:

This paper takes on a comprehensive study of humour and comical elements in the literary works of R.K. Narayan. One of RK Narayan's notable novels of pre-independence was "The Bachelor of Arts", where Narayan skillfully wrote several of his own life experiences into the narrative. This blend of fiction with real-life elements added a captivating layer to the story, set in the familiar world of Malgudi and depicting the life of a college student. RK Narayan's humour lies in the subtlety of dialogue and the quirks of individuals, with each character embodying a distinct personality that contributes to the overall comical atmosphere. Narayan's humour transcends cultural boundaries, presenting readers with a timeless and universal appreciation for the lighter side of life. This project begins with an exploration of the cultural backdrop that shapes the comical landscape in Narayan's novels and also elucidates the diverse ways in which Narayan utilizes wit, irony, and satire to create both light-hearted and thought-provoking moments. Methodologically, this study is a blend of literary analysis and socio-cultural influences that contribute to the comical dimensions in his works.

Keywords: Humour, satire, irony, socio-culture influences.

Narayan's masterful storytelling connects directly with the audience, capturing the essence of youth as a time of exploration, learning, and decision-making that shapes one's future. The novel tells a unique story, mixing unexpected plot twists with the protagonist's journey through failures in love and eventual transformation into a mendicant. Narayan

portrays this transformation not as a voluntary choice but as an escape from the pressures of society and personal despair. Amidst these serious themes, Narayan injects humour and comical elements, creating a relatable and engaging experience for readers.

The novel "The Bachelor of Arts" by R.K. Narayan masterfully intertwines elements of humour, irony, and wit within the captivating backdrop of the fictional town of Malgudi. The narrative follows Chandran, a final-year history student, as he navigates the quintessential experiences of college life, friendships, and intellectual debates. Ultimately, he transforms into a saint, only to later revert to an ordinary man. These elements introduce satire and irony into the narrative, shaping the novel's tone and providing insights into the complexities of youth, learning, and personal growth. Chandran's decision to embrace a life of discipline towards the end of his undergraduate studies reflects a pivotal moment in the story, highlighting themes of choice, passion, and the journey toward adulthood. Narayan's masterful storytelling connects directly with the audience, capturing the essence of youth as a time of exploration, learning, and decision-making that shapes one's future.

The first chapter of the novel sets a humorous tone by critiquing societal expectations, political influence, and education. Chandran, a talented speaker, deals with the Albert Mission college secretary's constant need for attention. The secretary tries to complain about his position but also seeks praise for his work. However, Chandran is more interested in discussing his accomplishments, showing his lack of interest in the secretary's problems. This scene highlights the novel's satirical take on people prioritising personal recognition over meaningful contributions. Chandran said: "Nobody invited you to become the secretary, You, forget that you begged, borrowed, and stole votes at the Union elections"¹.

This illustrates how the pursuit and desire for power can overshadow a person's happiness and lead to a life of discontent. In Indian philosophy, success is defined as finding happiness or contentment through one's work, but societal influences during the pre and post-independence eras shifted this perception.

R.K. Narayan portrays the age and circumstances of the protagonist, Chandran, as well as those of the supporting characters like Ramu, Chandran's father, and his mother. The depiction of the Indian family dynamics, Chandran's mother's love, father's care, and friend's loyalty, align perfectly with the storyline. For instance, Chandran, in his teenage years, is eager to attend a late-night movie show, which fascinates him. However, his strict yet caring father never allows it. Despite this, when Chandran excels in a debate, his father relents, allowing

him to enjoy the entire night with his friend Ramu. This scene showcases the balance between parental discipline and rewarding achievements, as well as the strong bonds within the Indian family unit. Chandran father said: "H'm. But I wouldn't advise you to make it a habit. Late shows are very bad for the health"².

As months passed on, November approached and suddenly Chandran realised the end semester exams were a few months away. Here, Narayan conveys the emotions of a young boy who struggles between enjoying life and fulfilling his responsibilities. Feeling alert, Chandran sketches a complex timetable to study, but irony takes its role when he hardly finds time to follow the schedule and study the entire syllabus of History and English.

In this plot, Narayan has detailed the intricacies of a student studying several subjects and passing examinations in a few months, probably, perhaps to simplify Narayan may also had similar experiences during his youthful days.

Chandran's father was amused to see Chandran being away from bed early morning and working seriously, Chandran then explained his complex situation to study the entire syllabus within March and asked his father to review his schedule and books, but Chandran's father refused as he was scared of History as he never read in his BA nor understood it previously. Here we can notice the shift in Chandran's notions towards studies and adulthood. In the beginning, Narayan portrays Chandran as a young boy who follows his instincts and navigates everyday life, but as he grows the sense of responsibility sets on his shoulders to study well and achieve success in life. Narayan's skill in creating humourous characters with different names adds a flavour of human and comical elements, Mr. Gajapathi the English lecturer was an adamant master in class and also condemned Indians for not having a grip over the language and always cut marks for students in finding minor mistakes, besides insulted other teachers for their lecturer in English.

Another peculiar character is Prof Ragavachar the principal of the college. Chandran received an invitation to discuss the inauguration of the History Association. Here Narayan has exploited the incident to build a strange characteristic of the professor also Chandran considers himself a confident and brave student. The witty thoughts in the mind of Chandran replicate the writer himself.

“Why this cowardice? Why should he be afraid of Ragavachar or anybody? Human being to human being. Remove those spectacles, the turban, and the long coat, and let Ragavachar

appear only in a loin-cloth, and Mr. Ragavachar would lose three-quarters of his appearance. Where was the sense in feeling nervous before a pair of spectacles, a turban, and a black long coat"?⁴.

The Indian Orthodox families are always driven by their children's education and future, similarly, Chandran's father kept waiting for his son to begin the scheduled and complex timetable for his preparation for the upcoming exams but ironically Chandran forgot about his plan for his studies completely.

"Father asked, Your plan of study not come into force yet?"⁵.

On a similar note, RK Narayan never fails to bring about the culture of Indians in respecting the saints and seers who have protected and propagated the purpose of life in several ways.

To illustrate this concept the writer has linked it with a hilarious situation infused with underlying humour. Chandran's mother always suspected that someone stole her jasmine flowers in the early hours of the day, even before the rooster crowed. Chandran's father and younger brother Seenu took up the challenge of catching the thief. One day they discovered that it was a sanyasi who had been jumping into their compound to pluck flowers. Despite being caught, the explanation provided by the sanyasi offers a strong message to the community or even to the readers.

"If you lock the gate, how else can I get in than by jumping over the wall? As for stealing flowers, flowers are there, God-given. What matters is whether you throw the flowers on the gods, or I do it. It is all the same.' But you should ask our permission, 'You are all asleep at that hour, and I don't wish to disturb you. I can't wait until you get up because my worship is over before sunrise'"⁶.

After listening to the words of the sanyasi, Chandru's mother was panicked and worried that the sanyasi would curse the family and that souls leave their bodies.

After a few months, Chandran completed his final year examinations and received his results, passing B. A. This was a great relief for him. However, now all his relatives were suggesting different streams for Chandran to pursue. Some suggested studying Law, others recommended entering into government services, and some gave lectures on starting a business.

Chandran was irritated to hear all of this and had already made up his mind to go to England to pursue a doctoral degree however he planned to do so next year.

This highlights how society often offers sympathy but lacks true empathy, which doesn't contribute to the personal growth of individuals. Narayan satirically illustrates society's indifference towards a child's passion and interests, instead pressuring them to conform to others' expectations.

Chandran indulged in a luxurious holiday, spending his days engrossed in books at the library and wandering along the riverbanks. One evening, he encountered a girl playing in the river's sands, estimating her age to be around fifteen. Over time, Chandran became captivated by her behaviour and beauty. He spent sleepless nights for months, anxiously wondering if his beloved was already married. As the months went by and Chandran's infatuation grew, he became lethargic and jobless, consumed by thoughts of the girl day and night.

His idle state mirrored the saying "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." Determined to learn more about the girl, Chandran sought out his friend Mohan, who lived opposite the girl's house. Through Mohan, Chandran discovered that the girl's name was Malathi, the daughter of Krishna Iyer. Eager to pursue a relationship with her, Chandran approached his parents about arranging a match, but his mother advised against it.

"Chandar, why won't you consider any of the dozens of girls that have been proposed to you?" Chandran rejected this suggestion indignantly. "But how are you sure they are prepared to give their daughter to you?" "They will have to."⁷ In essence, Chandran's story reflects the theme of infatuation and the consequences of an idle mind, along with the underlying wit in Chandran's mother for choosing a girl who is the daughter of a clerk.

An important theme explored by RK Narayan is the portrayal of early marriages for girls, often before they reach puberty. In Chandran's situation, his mother believes that a girl marrying at the age of sixteen indicates underlying issues with the girl herself, along with concerns about caste and the crucial aspect of matching horoscopes for a perfect match.

"Sixteen!" mother screamed. "They can't be all right if they have kept the girl unmarried till sixteen. She must have attained puberty ages ago. They can't be all right. We have a face to keep in this town. Do you think it is all child's play?"⁸ During this period, one of the significant mysteries for Chandran was figuring out which side his father favoured. His father didn't seem to create direct barriers for Chandran, but he also didn't offer much support. It seemed like he

lacked confidence in his judgment regarding these matters and had handed the full rein to his wife.

In his works, RK Narayan subtly conveys a message about the inherent selfishness that can manifest in individuals, be it a parent, a friend, or even oneself. He suggests that human nature often prioritizes personal desires and gains, sometimes at the expense of relationships or ethical considerations. For instance, in "The Bachelor of Arts," Chandran perceives his parents as being more concerned about the dowry they receive for his marriage rather than focusing on finding the ideal life partner for him.

This portrayal reflects Narayan's commentary on how worldly desires and materialistic pursuits can overshadow deeper values and priorities. Societal aspirations are vividly portrayed in the town of Malgudi, reflecting the realities of a society where a person's status holds significant importance in the eyes of their neighbours, often overshadowing their contentment. The Krishna Iyer family's lower status, when compared to Chandran's family prestige, leads to hesitation from Chandran's parents in considering a match between Chandran and Malathi. Through the character of Chandran's mother, Narayan satirically highlights the dowry system, which is a pervasive issue in Indian society. The dowry system reduces a girl to a commodity to be traded. Despite being a woman herself, Chandran's mother insists on dowry for another girl, revealing how societal norms can lead to ignorance and moral blindness. Narayan introduces another significant element: individuals often place unwavering faith in predictions, especially when facing life's challenges. Despite the uncertainty of future predictions, people are willing to believe them wholeheartedly. Astrology plays a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of Chandran's life throughout the novel.

According to astrological studies, two priests from opposite ends made conflicting predictions regarding Chandran and Malathi's compatibility. While the priests on Chandran's side found a perfect match in their horoscopes, Malathi's father and their astrologer predicted potential dangers if the two were to marry, leading to Chandran's rejection as a suitor for Malathi. This event deeply affected Chandran, causing him to ponder intensely about his love for Malathi. Narayan skillfully conveys Chandran's inner turmoil and anguish through beautifully expressed lines that reflect his sorrowful and desperate state. Amidst the serious issue of horoscope matching, Narayan introduces moments of comedic relief in the dialogues between Chandran and Mohan. Chandran employs various tactics to convince Malathi's father to agree to their horoscope match and allow them to marry. However, despite Chandran's efforts,

every attempt ultimately fails. Despite Chandran's best efforts, fate had its own plans for him. He wrote a letter to Malathi, asking her to wait for two years until they could marry according to the horoscope predictions. Chandran entrusted Mohan with delivering this letter, but Mohan neglected to do so. A few days later, Chandran discovered that Malathi had become engaged to one of her cousins.

This final decision had a profound and devastating impact on Chandran's life. Unable to bear the separation from Malathi, he decided to leave for Madras. This marked a tragic turn in the story as Chandran, overwhelmed by despair, contemplated suicide. To avoid this fate, he ended up becoming an enforced sanyasi (renunciant) to escape the cycle of suffering. Chandran's life became increasingly disordered, leading him to move to Chennai. There, he spent a few days in a hotel and came into contact with a person named Kailash. Unfortunately, Kailash gradually influenced Chandran into adopting unhealthy habits and making poor choices.

This illustrates how the world can ensnare a vulnerable mind into negative actions, leading to sorrow and bitter experiences. Similarly, Chandran finds it difficult to remain in Chennai and decides to distance himself, albeit not towards Malgudi. Despite being born in the town, Chandran's nostalgia for Malathi resurfaces. Narayan, as the orchestrator of Chandran's life, introduces the theme of the impermanence of worldly attachments in Chandran's mind. This prompts Chandran to contemplate becoming a monk. He relinquishes all his possessions and travels to Mylapore, where he encounters a barber named Raghavan. Raghavan assists Chandran in adopting the appearance of a sanyasi by shaving his head and providing him with a lion cloth, and an ochre cloth to cover his body.

Narayan strongly conveys a message about the significance of one's youthful days and the potential for success if they are utilized wisely. However, falling into the clutches of desires without considering the consequences can lead to misguidance in life. Chandran serves as a testament to this theme, highlighting the repercussions of making poor choices without proper guidance. This fictional character, Chandran, directly or indirectly resonates with any youth, whether a twenty-three-year-old boy or girl. Chandran's journey serves as a cautionary tale about the importance of making informed decisions and seeking guidance to navigate life's challenges effectively.

The works of R.K. Narayan perfectly encapsulate irony and satire, deftly highlighting the struggles and challenges faced by characters such as Chandran, who, despite being an

ascetic., experiences a reversal of fortune. In his life, Chandran often finds himself having to beg for food, sometimes going hungry for weeks until someone recognizes him as a sanyasi (a wandering ascetic) and offers him food. One of the most striking aspects of this narrative is how people's perception of Chandran changes when they see him as a mystic saint. Suddenly, they gather around him, seeking solutions to their problems. Chandran, however, remains silent, indicating that he has been in a state of silence for ten years, ten months, and ten days. Despite this, the villagers assume that Chandran's presence alone will bring blessings to their village and them individually.

The contrast between Chandran's real circumstances and the villagers' misguided beliefs highlights the superficial nature of human perception. This juxtaposition also underscores the irony and satire in Narayan's storytelling. Through Chandran's experiences, Narayan deftly critiques societal norms and human tendencies, inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of belief, perception, and reality.

Upon hearing such sentiments, Chandran was overcome with guilt and felt compelled to reveal his true identity to the people, confessing that he was just an ordinary layman like anyone else. But he was not ready to face the people therefore he escaped overnight from the village

He wanted to acknowledge that he had been living solely on charity, without earning anything through righteous means or spiritual virtue. This incident poignantly illustrates how a person may deceive the entire world but cannot deceive their own conscience. Chandran's inner sense of morality prevented him from continuing in this deception. This bitter experience served as a profound lesson for Chandran, leading him to grasp the reality of life and the genuine philosophy underpinning every relationship.

He concluded that true love and friendship are elusive in this world, exemplified by the disappearance of his closest friend, Ramu, from his life after their graduation, never to return. This realization forced Chandran to confront the transient nature of human connections and the often harsh truths of existence, shaping his understanding of the complexities inherent in human relationships.

Chandran came to a profound realization of his mistakes and questioned why he hadn't initially seen Malathi as a sister figure when they first met at the beach. This single dialogue provides much-needed comic relief after the portrayal of Chandran's arduous journey as a forced saint. This moment encapsulates Chandran's shift in perspective, as he concludes that

'Love and Friendship were nothing but the most fleeting illusions.' This revelation serves as a pivotal point in the narrative, highlighting Chandran's growth and understanding of the complexities of human relationships.

“It led me to beg and cheat; to desert my parents; it is responsible for my mother's extra wrinkles and grey hairs, for my father's neglect of the garden; and a poor postmaster is a shirt and a _dhoti_ less on account of my love”⁹.

Narayan skillfully depicts the consequences of a life devoid of discrimination, showcasing the potential pitfalls even amidst prosperity. In the novel's conclusion, Narayan revitalizes Chandran's life by making him responsible, bringing him back to Malgudi. Chandran secures a job at a newspaper company and earns a respectable income each month. He dedicates himself tirelessly to promoting the paper throughout the town, gaining insight into people's mindsets, and effectively circulating the news within the publication. This transformation in Chandran's life emphasizes Narayan's exploration of personal growth and responsibility, illustrating the impact of discernment and purpose in navigating life's challenges and opportunities.

“He now realized that humanity fell into four types:

(1) Persons who cared for the latest news and could afford an anna a day. (2) Persons who were satisfied with stale news in old papers which could be borrowed from neighbours. (3) Persons who read newspapers in reading rooms. (4) Persons who could be coerced by repeated visits”¹⁰.

In the end, Chandran agrees to marry another girl named Sushila to fulfill his mother's wish, despite the age difference, as Sushila is still in her sixth form. Chandran is drawn to Sushila not only for her physical appearance but also for her intelligence and cultured demeanor. This decision brings a renewed sense of love and affection into Chandran's life, vitalizing his outlook on human relationships.

Throughout the novel, Narayan delves into key themes such as genuine relationships, the significance of education, the importance of employment, and, most importantly, the virtues of self-discipline and self-control. Satire pervades every aspect of Chandran's journey, from the novel's inception to its conclusion, adding depth and nuance to the narrative. Narayan's exploration of these themes and incorporation of satire contribute to a rich and multifaceted depiction of Chandran's experiences and growth throughout the story.

Narayan's mastery is evident in his detailed depiction of every scenario, from capturing the essence of the town and its inhabitants to articulating Chandran's internal monologue. This approach allows any reader to easily empathize with Chandran's emotions and experiences, making his journey relatable and impactful. Young readers, in particular, can glean valuable lessons from Chandran's life, learning about themes such as personal growth, responsibility, and the complexities of human relationships at a tender age.

Furthermore, Narayan skillfully portrays the intricacies of orthodox families, shedding light on the pre-independent notions that permeate social structures. This exploration adds depth and context to the narrative, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the cultural and societal dynamics at play in Chandran's world. Overall, Narayan's storytelling prowess not only entertains but also educates, making his works timeless and relevant across generations.

Narayan's use of humour and comedic elements plays a crucial role in conveying the novel's themes. His humour goes beyond mere amusement; it carries profound insights into life and values. Chandran's infatuation with Malathi and his self-imposed asceticism are integral components that contribute to the novel's ironic tone. Narayan's mastery of situational comedy shines through, particularly in Chandran's experiences. For instance, Chandran's daily observations of Malathi near the beach or his struggles to portray himself as a knowledgeable saint create moments of great humour in the narrative. These instances not only entertain readers but also serve as vehicles for exploring deeper themes such as love, self-discovery, and the contrast between appearance and reality.

Overall, Narayan's adeptness at blending humour with meaningful commentary elevates the novel, making it not just a delightful read but also a thought-provoking exploration of human nature and society.

Chandran's interactions with characters like Malathi, Ramu, and other friends gradually unravel his initial expectations, turning them into ironic reflections as he loses connections with them over the years. Narayan skillfully addresses the hypocrisy prevalent in society, where individuals often wear masks to fulfill selfish desires while projecting a facade to the world.

Narayan's unique blend of humour and wit creates a lighthearted ambiance, even while delving into serious themes such as societal pressures, identity crises, and cultural clashes. Characterization plays a pivotal role in the novel, as each character contributes to the exploration of various societal issues. Chandran's journey from innocence to self-awareness is marked by humorous incidents that underscore his personal growth and development.

Furthermore, other characters such as Professor Brown, Professor Gajapati, the timid Raghavan, the thief-turned-sadhu, as well as Chandran's friends and family, all add layers of humour through their thoughts, words, and actions. This multifaceted approach to characterization not only enriches the narrative but also highlights the complexities and contradictions of human nature and society. Narayan's masterful storytelling ensures that humour serves as a vehicle for deeper insights into the human experience and societal dynamics.

Through humour, Narayan skillfully critiques social norms, traditions, and the human condition, providing valuable insights into Indian society and its complexities. He particularly highlights issues such as the dowry system, caste oppression, child marriage, and male chauvinism with keen observation and subtlety. Narayan's approach allows these major societal issues to be brought into focus without being heavy-handed or didactic.

RK Narayan's novels represent a treasure of humour and wisdom inviting readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and empathy. Through a profound exploration of RK Narayan's narratives, we develop a heightened appreciation for the profound impact of laughter and the lasting influence of one of India's most beloved storytellers. Narayan's works not only evoke laughter and offer glimpses into the intricacies of Malgudi but also significantly enhance our lives and deepen our comprehension of human experiences.

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