

Tharoor versus Narayan: are the avant-garde linguistic experiments actually left behind?

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Abstract. When evaluating R.K. Narayan, Shashi Tharoor seems to commit himself to these theses: Narayan has a natural style of writing, or a style which is second nature to him; to go significantly beyond his limited range he would have to experiment more with language, reducing the accessibility of his fictions. I cast doubt on this combination by proposing that Narayan's middle-of-the-road style requires suppressing linguistic innovations in earlier drafts.

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“Suppressing all that would be there:

That's how you'll lose all your hair!”

Shashi Tharoor's evaluation of R.K. Narayan, soon after the novelist's death, seems committed to two theses, introduced in the abstract above:

(Natural thesis) Narayan has a style of writing which is natural to him, or at least second nature.

(Innovation thesis) For Narayan to go significantly beyond his limited range, he would have to engage in linguistic experiments in his fictions and this would reduce their accessibility.

The purpose of this paper is to dispute this combination. But first here are some quotations from Tharoor supporting the interpretation of him as committed to the two theses:

- (a) “The gentle wit, the simple sentences, the easy assumption of the inevitabilities of the tolerant Hindu social and philosophical system, the characteristically straightforward plotting, were all hallmarks of Narayan’s charm and helped make many of his novels and stories interesting and often pleasurable. But I felt that they also pointed to the banality of Narayan’s concerns, the narrowness of his vision, the predictability of his prose, and the shallowness of the pool of experience and vocabulary from which he drew.” (2001)
- (b) “the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities and clichés – abounded, as if the author had learned them in a school textbook and was unaware that they have been hollowed by repetition.” (2001)

Probably it is difficult for various academics and students in the provinces of faraway England to read these criticisms without thinking, “That is similar to how we are seen as well”: bumpkins who like everything simple and whose thoughts are rich in clichés. For example, those campaigning for pluralism and historical figures in economics over the mathematical neo-classical variety are surely seen by some in this way. Anyway, I shall set aside those parallels to focus on the combination of theses identified.

Here is an alternative proposal: some of the innovations which Tharoor would like to see are actually suppressed, as the shop worker or the teacher or the doctor or politician often suppresses emotions for their job and associated manners of expression. They may well be there in first drafts. When I try to imitate Narayan, I often find that it takes quite a few drafts to get this middle-of-the-road style, even online, and earlier drafts sometimes contain cleverer stuff (Edward 2022).

Why accept Tharoor's conception of a natural and comfortable style which Narayan would have had to strain beyond to reach a higher level or expand further, instead of this suppression model? For all I know, he has seen various innovations but crossed them out.

References

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