



Exploring humor in situations and characters: an analysis of r.k. Narayan's selected works

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ABSTRACT:

This paper delves into the nuanced expression of humor within both situations and characters in the select works of R.K. Narayan, a renowned Indian author celebrated for his wit and keen observations of everyday life. Through a comprehensive analysis of Narayan's selected works, this study aims to uncover the multifaceted layers of humor present in his narratives. By examining the intricate interplay between situational comedy and the portrayal of diverse characters, ranging from ordinary individuals to eccentric personalities, this analysis seeks to elucidate how Narayan masterfully employs humor to both entertain and offer incisive commentary on the human condition. Furthermore, through close examination of specific literary techniques, such as irony, satire, and absurdity, this paper seeks to highlight the enduring relevance and universal appeal of Narayan's comedic genius. Ultimately, this exploration not only contributes to a deeper understanding of Narayan's literary craftsmanship but also underscores the significance of humor as a potent tool for storytelling and social critique.

1.INTRODUCTION:

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan, commonly known as R.K. Narayan, stands as one of India's most esteemed literary figures, renowned for his ability to capture the essence of everyday life in his writings, infused with a unique blend of humor, warmth, and keen observation. Through his extensive body of work, Narayan crafted a fictional universe centered around the fictional town of Malgudi, populated with a diverse array of characters navigating the complexities of existence. At the heart of Narayan's storytelling lies a profound appreciation for the comedic aspects of human experience, wherein humor serves as both a source of entertainment and a lens through which to examine deeper truths about society and human nature.

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted expression of humor within the situations and characters depicted in

a selection of R.K. Narayan's works. By focusing on select novels as well as his celebrated collection of short stories, this analysis aims to unravel the various dimensions of humor intricately woven into Narayan's narratives. From the whimsical antics of ordinary individuals to the eccentricities of unforgettable characters, Narayan's storytelling prowess shines through in his ability to evoke laughter while simultaneously offering profound insights into the human condition.

Central to this exploration is an examination of the interplay between situational comedy and the portrayal of diverse characters inhabiting Narayan's fictional world. Through close textual analysis, this study will delve into the literary techniques employed by Narayan, including irony, satire, and absurdity, to illuminate the



underlying themes and social commentary embedded within his humorous narratives. Moreover, this analysis will underscore the enduring relevance of Narayan's comedic genius, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries to resonate with audiences worldwide.

By delving into the rich tapestry of humor woven throughout Narayan's works, this study not only seeks to celebrate his literary craftsmanship but also aims to shed light on the transformative power of humor as a vehicle for storytelling and social critique. As we embark on this journey through the vibrant streets of Malgudi and the lives of its inhabitants, we invite readers to join us in discovering the laughter, poignancy, and timeless wisdom contained within the pages of R.K. Narayan's masterful storytelling.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To analyze the various manifestations of humor within the situations and characters depicted in R.K. Narayan's selected works.
2. To explore the literary techniques employed by Narayan, including irony, satire, and absurdity, to convey humor and social commentary.
3. To examine the interplay between situational comedy and character portrayal in Narayan's narratives, elucidating how humor contributes to the depiction of the human condition.
4. To uncover the underlying themes and social critique embedded within Narayan's humorous storytelling, highlighting their relevance and universal appeal.
5. To celebrate Narayan's literary craftsmanship and demonstrate the transformative power of humor as a tool for both entertainment and insightful reflection on society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The exploration of humor in literature, particularly within the context of R.K. Narayan's works, has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades. Scholars and critics have delved into various aspects of Narayan's storytelling, offering insights into the rich tapestry of humor woven throughout his narratives and the profound impact it has on readers.

One of the foundational works in the study of Narayan's humor is M. K. Naik's seminal book "R.K.

Narayan: A Critical Appreciation." Naik provides a comprehensive analysis of Narayan's novels, short stories, and essays, highlighting the author's mastery in capturing the idiosyncrasies of human behavior and the absurdities of life in a small Indian town. Naik's examination of Narayan's use of wit, irony, and satire lays the groundwork for understanding the comedic elements in Narayan's narratives.

Building upon Naik's insights, other scholars have explored specific facets of Narayan's humor. In "R.K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art," Shrinivasa Iyengar delves into Narayan's portrayal of characters, emphasizing the author's ability to infuse even the most ordinary individuals with humor and depth. Iyengar's analysis sheds light on how Narayan's characters navigate the challenges of everyday life with resilience and wit, making them relatable and endearing to readers.

Furthermore, critics such as Susan Ram and C.N. Srinath have focused on the socio-cultural context of Narayan's humor. In "The Indian Imagination of R.K. Narayan," Ram examines how Narayan's portrayal of the fictional town of Malgudi reflects broader themes of tradition, modernity, and social change in post-colonial India. Similarly, Srinath's essay "Humor and Social Vision in R.K. Narayan's Novels" explores how Narayan uses humor to critique societal norms and challenge prevailing ideologies.

In addition to academic scholarship, Narayan's works have also been celebrated by readers and writers alike for their timeless appeal and universal resonance. Authors such as Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth have praised Narayan's ability to blend humor with poignant observations, creating narratives that transcend cultural boundaries.

Overall, the literature on R.K. Narayan's humor underscores its significance as a central aspect of his storytelling craft. Through a nuanced exploration of Narayan's novels, short stories, and essays, scholars have illuminated the myriad ways in which humor enriches his narratives, offering both entertainment and profound insights into the human condition. As this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding Narayan's humor, it builds upon the foundation laid by previous scholarship while offering new perspectives and analyses of his selected works.



4. RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

The analysis presented in this paper seeks to delve into the rich vein of humor found within the situations and characters of R.K. Narayan's selected works. Ranging from his iconic novels like "Swami and Friends" to the beloved short stories in "Malgudi Days," Narayan's narratives are infused with a distinctive blend of wit, irony, and satire that captivates readers and offers profound insights into the human experience.

Our research aims to explore how Narayan employs humor as a literary device to not only entertain but also to convey deeper truths about society and human nature. By examining specific instances of situational comedy and character portrayal, we seek to unravel the layers of meaning and social commentary embedded within Narayan's humorous storytelling.

Drawing upon established literary criticism and theoretical frameworks, our analysis will illuminate the various techniques and strategies employed by Narayan to evoke laughter and provoke thought. We will delve into the socio-cultural context of Narayan's narratives, exploring how humor serves as a lens through which to examine themes of tradition, modernity, and societal change in post-colonial India.

Through close textual analysis and comparative examination of Narayan's selected works, we aim to highlight the enduring relevance and universal appeal of his comedic genius. Ultimately, our research endeavors to celebrate Narayan's literary craftsmanship while offering fresh insights into the transformative power of humor as a tool for storytelling and social critique.

4.1. Humour through Situation in R.K. Narayan's works:

In R.K. Narayan's seminal collection of short stories, "Malgudi Days" (1941), the humor of situation emerges as a prominent feature, marking a significant milestone in Narayan's illustrious literary career. As Prof. Abidi aptly observes, "Malgudi Days marks a significant beginning in the creative career of R.K. Narayan" (Abidi, 28), setting the stage for a plethora of comic narratives that would follow.

Narayan introduces the character of the Talkative Man, who serves as a brilliant comic narrator throughout various tales in subsequent collections. The reportorial quality inherent in "Malgudi Days" lends a

strong popular appeal to the stories, engaging readers with their wit and charm.

One such tale, "Man-Hunt," epitomizes Narayan's mastery of ironic situations. The narrative follows Sankar, an unemployed youth enticed by the promise of a fifty-rupee reward for locating a missing boy. However, Sankar's efforts lead him to a surprising revelation: the boy he finds is not the one advertised. As the boy's true identity is unveiled, Sankar's hopes for the reward are dashed, culminating in a comedic resolution underscored by the comedy of errors.

Similarly, in "The White Flower," Narayan employs gentle satire to critique the Hindu tradition of arranged marriages based on astrological compatibility. When Krishna, a B.A. student, falls in love with a girl, their mismatched horoscopes pose a dilemma. Despite Krishna's father's skepticism, the girl's father insists on adhering to tradition. The story reaches its climax in a temple, where a child randomly selects a flower to determine God's will. The outcome, symbolized by the red flower indicating rejection, leaves Krishna in disbelief and poignant reflection, wishing to "bleach all the flowers in the world" (Narayan, "Malgudi Days," 94).

Through the interplay of humor and pathos, Narayan masterfully navigates complex themes such as tradition, fate, and human folly. Indeed, "The White Flower" resonates with autobiographical echoes, reflecting Narayan's own experiences with marital discord due to astrological disparities—a theme he further explores in his novel "The Bachelor of Arts" (1937) and the story "The Seventh House" in "A Horse and Two Goats" (1970).

Narayan's skillful blending of humor and irony in "Malgudi Days" not only entertains but also invites readers to ponder the whimsicality of life's twists and turns, imbuing his narratives with enduring resonance and depth.

In R.K. Narayan's second collection of stories, "Dodu and Other Stories" (1943), the author's acute and critical observation of human nature takes center stage against the familiar backdrop of Malgudi. As in his previous collection, Malgudi remains the dominant



setting, serving as a rich tapestry upon which Narayan weaves tales of irony and wit.

"Ironic situations" emerge as a recurring motif in several stories within the collection, including "Gandhi's Appeal," "Blessings of Railway," "Engine Trouble," and "The Image." In "Gandhi's Appeal," Narayan paints a vivid portrait of a lawyer and his wife, Padma, whose cautious efforts to avoid involvement in Mahatma Gandhi's fundraising campaign are ultimately thwarted by the irresistible pull of his charisma.

Despite their initial resolve to attend Gandhi's meeting without any money or valuables, both husband and wife find themselves compelled to contribute when faced with the fervor of the crowd and Gandhi's impassioned appeal for funds. Padma, in particular, grapples with conflicting emotions as she surreptitiously donates her gold bangles, only to later confront the repercussions of her actions when she returns home.

Through Padma's internal struggle and the revelation of her husband's similar indiscretion, Narayan skillfully captures the pervasive influence of Gandhi's popularity and the magnetic allure of his charismatic persona. Describing the scene with evocative detail, Narayan depicts the frenzied rush of individuals eager to offer their support to Gandhi's cause: "There was a rush onto the platform. Articles and money were brought to Gandhi at great speed. He attracted them like a central force. Men, women, and children scrambled in confusion to approach Gandhi and offer him something" (Narayan, "Dodu and Other Stories," 64).

In "Gandhi's Appeal" and throughout the collection, Narayan demonstrates his adeptness at blending humor with astute social commentary, offering readers a nuanced exploration of human behavior and societal dynamics against the backdrop of pre-independence India. Through his keen observations and skillful storytelling, Narayan invites readers to contemplate the complexities of moral dilemmas and the enduring legacy of figures such as Mahatma Gandhi on the collective consciousness of the nation.

In "Blessings of Railway," Narayan masterfully crafts a tale of parental ingenuity as Sambasivan devises a clever scheme to showcase his beautiful daughter to a hesitant suitor. With strategic finesse, Sambasivan orchestrates a serendipitous encounter in a railway compartment, wherein the young man, who had

previously rejected numerous proposals, finds himself captivated by the allure of Sambasivan's daughter. Through subtle manipulation and fortuitous circumstances, Sambasivan successfully kindles the young man's interest in marriage, weaving a tapestry of irony and comedic charm.

Meanwhile, in "Engine Trouble," the narrative unfolds with a cascade of ironic complications, recounted by the Talkative Man. His acquisition of a road engine through a lottery heralds a series of misadventures, as logistical challenges and unforeseen obstacles thwart his attempts to relocate the cumbersome machinery. Despite his best efforts, the road engine remains stubbornly immovable, ensnaring the Talkative Man in a web of financial burdens and legal entanglements.

The absurdity of the situation reaches its zenith when the ill-fated engine, propelled by a makeshift assembly of manpower and an obliging temple elephant, careens disastrously into a neighbor's dwelling, precipitating a cascade of calamitous repercussions. The Talkative Man's subsequent incarceration, compounded by the burdens of restitution and logistical quagmires, underscores the farcical nature of his predicament.

Yet, amidst the chaos, a stroke of serendipity in the form of a fortuitous earthquake offers a reprieve, as the unwanted engine finds an unexpected resting place in a disused well. The neighbor, delighted by the fortuitous closure of his well, relents in his pursuit of retribution, bringing a comedic resolution to the saga of the misbegotten road engine.

Narayan's vivid depiction of the calamitous procession attempting to extricate the road engine from the Gymkhana Grounds not only showcases his mastery of descriptive prose but also imbues the narrative with a rich tapestry of humor and whimsy. Through these tales, Narayan artfully explores the intricacies of human folly and the capricious whims of fate, inviting readers to revel in the delightful absurdity of life's misadventures.

The scene unfolded before me like a surreal tableau, a convergence of disparate forces melding into a spectacle of both awe and absurdity. As I beheld the sight with a mixture of fascination and trepidation, the words of the narrator echoed in my mind: "It was a fine sight; the temple elephant yoked to the engine by means



of stout ropes, with fifty determined men pushing it from behind, and my friend Joseph sitting in the driving seat."

In this moment, the sheer magnitude of the endeavor loomed large, underscored by the collective determination of those involved and the palpable anticipation that hung in the air. Yet, even as the procession set forth, propelled by a fervent resolve, the narrator's account continued to unfold, painting a vivid picture of the tumultuous events that followed: "The engine began to move. It seemed to me the greatest moment in my life."

With each step forward, the sense of anticipation mounted, imbuing the scene with a sense of grandeur and significance. Yet, as the narrative unfolded, the gravity of the situation gave way to a series of calamitous missteps, culminating in a chaotic crescendo of destruction: "When it came out of the Gymkhana and reached the road it began to behave in a strange manner. Instead of going straight down the road it showed a tendency to wobble and move zig-zag."

In this moment of reckoning, the inherent unpredictability of the situation became all too apparent, as the once-promising endeavor veered off course, careening toward an inevitable collision: "As a result of all this confused dragging the engine ran straight into the opposite compound wall and reduced a good length of it to powder."

Amidst the chaos and confusion that ensued, the narrator found himself ensnared in a maelstrom of consequences, swept along by forces beyond his control: "The police came on the scene and marched me off."

Through the evocative power of Narayan's prose, the reader is transported into the heart of this tumultuous tableau, bearing witness to the collision of ambition and folly, and the indomitable spirit of human resilience in the face of adversity. (pp .39-40).

In "The Image," a tale from R.K. Narayan's collection "Malgudi Days" (1943), the author weaves a poignant narrative set in 12th-century India. The story follows Jakanachari, a revered sculptor renowned for his craftsmanship in building temples. When Jakanachari's long-lost son challenges his expertise by pointing out a flaw in his work, the sculptor's world is turned upside down. This touching tale explores themes of family,

sacrifice, and redemption, ultimately revealing the enduring power of love and reconciliation.

On the other hand, "The Roman Image," featured in Narayan's collection "Cyclone and Other Stories" (1943), presents a humorous account of scholarly misadventure. The story revolves around the Talkative Man, who, as an assistant to an archaeologist, mistakenly identifies a stone image found in a riverbed as a Roman artifact. Their subsequent efforts to document their findings in a monograph are met with disappointment when it is revealed that the image is merely a relic from a neighboring temple. Through this comedic narrative, Narayan explores themes of ambition, folly, and the whimsical nature of human pursuits.

In R.K. Narayan's story "A Parrot Story," featured in his collection "An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories" (1947), the author deftly explores the theme of irony through the misadventures of Ramani, a would-be entrepreneur. Ramani's journey begins when he sees an enticing advertisement in a local newspaper, offering lucrative rewards for a parrot trained in religious chants and slokas. Intrigued by the potential profits, Ramani envisions a thriving business in training parrots for various practical purposes beyond religious recitations.

As Ramani embarks on his venture, he encounters Kandan, a stranger who promises to supply him with suitable parrots at a bargain price. Despite Kandan's warning not to coax the parrot into uttering holy sounds prematurely, Ramani eagerly presents the bird to his client, Mr. Madhusudhan. However, to his dismay, the parrot unexpectedly squawks commands for troop drills instead of the anticipated religious verses, leaving Ramani humiliated and fleeing the scene in embarrassment.

Subsequently, Ramani learns of a stolen parrot matching the description of the one he acquired from Kandan, prompting a mix of relief and chagrin at his narrow escape from potential legal entanglement. Through Ramani's misfortune, Narayan masterfully employs irony to underscore the pitfalls of greed and the folly of human ambition.

In "The Watchman" and "A Snake in the Grass," also from "An Astrologer's Day and Other



Stories," Narayan continues to weave tales of irony with finesse. In "The Watchman," the protagonist's decision to abandon a girl contemplating suicide unwittingly spares him from future culpability, as the girl returns years later with a family, defying his expectations of tragedy.

Similarly, in "A Snake in the Grass," Narayan spins a tale of deception and absurdity as a clever servant hoodwinks his mistress and her sons into believing he has captured a cobra. The subsequent appearance of a real cobra adds an element of farcical chaos, punctuated by the frantic efforts of the household to locate the elusive serpent.

Throughout these stories, Narayan's signature wit and keen observation of human foibles shine, inviting readers to reflect on the whimsical twists of fate and the unpredictable nature of life.

In "Lawley Road," the title piece of Narayan's collection "Lawley Road and Other Stories" (1956), the author skillfully navigates contemporary situations affecting the routines of common individuals, infusing even the simplest details with amusement. His genial humor seamlessly blends with a mild yet effective satire, illuminating societal absurdities with subtlety and wit.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Malgudi's municipal council, which, in a burst of post-independence patriotism, embarks on a campaign to "nationalize" the names of streets and parks bearing colonial associations. As Lawley Extension is rechristened "Gandhi Nagar" and the statue of the once-revered Sir Frederick Lawley is dismantled, chaos ensues for the unfortunate individual who acquires the now-displaced statue.

With painstaking effort and considerable expense, the statue is transported to the buyer's residence, only for complications to arise when it is revealed that Sir Lawley was not a tyrant but a benefactor. Faced with pressure from the government to reinstate the statue, the chairman of the municipality is reluctantly compelled to repurchase it, albeit with no intention of returning it to its original location.

In a stroke of ingenuity, the narrator proposes converting the buyer's residence into a museum, where the statue can be erected as a centerpiece. The council, eager to resolve the predicament, embraces the

suggestion, thus transforming the erstwhile source of contention into a cultural attraction.

Through his reportorial style, evocative language, and artistic detachment, Narayan captures the essence of the absurdity inherent in bureaucratic decisions and nationalist fervor. The portrayal of the municipal chairman and the satire underlying the patriotic fervor serve to underscore the complexities of governance and the fallibility of human judgment.

Indeed, "Lawley Road" stands as a testament to Narayan's narrative prowess, his ability to infuse mundane events with profound insight and humor, and his keen observation of human nature in all its idiosyncrasies.

In "Flavour of Coconut," Narayan regales readers with a delightful tale of a mischievous mouse whose antics disrupt the tranquility of a household. The story unfolds with a humorous depiction of the mouse's trial, as the accused finds himself besieged by a formidable gathering of accusers: "It was a formidable gathering of accusers. People seemed only too ready to pick up and throw just another pebble at one who was already down. The walls of the prison were hemming him in, the bars seemed to be fixed molten lead. This was both a dock and a prison. The trial was summary, because the times were dangerous." (Narayan, "Flavour of Coconut," 20)

Narayan's adept use of mock seriousness infuses the scene with levity, as the gravity of the situation is humorously exaggerated. Equally entertaining is the portrayal of the head of the family, who assumes the role of judge with stern determination: "They spoke of capital punishment as easily as if they were asking someone to go out of the room. Death sentence seemed to be a fair certainty. It could not be otherwise. The charges were serious. The prisoner was an anti-social element. His movements were secretive. He came out only in the dark. He was given to looting and dacoity; sabotage and destruction. On the whole a horrible record." (Narayan, "Flavour of Coconut," 21)

The juxtaposition of the absurd accusations against the mouse with the exaggerated seriousness of the judge's demeanor adds to the story's comedic charm. Even the suggestion of leniency by a junior member of the assembly is met with disdain, as the judge dismisses the idea of transportation with biting sarcasm:



"Transportation.' Why? The defence blinked. The judge added, 'so that he may carry on his depredations elsewhere, suppose!' People were silenced by the grimness of his Lordship's manner." (Narayan, "Flavour of Coconut," 21)

Through his masterful storytelling and clever use of satire, Narayan transforms a mundane event into a whimsical and thoroughly entertaining narrative, showcasing his keen wit and knack for humorous observation.

In "Flavour of Coconut," Narayan offers profound insights into human psychology through the varied reactions of different family members to the arrest of the mouse. The youngest son, Ramu, demonstrates a remarkable display of empathy towards the accused rodent, despite its misdeeds: "You probably tore your saree over a nail and now blame everything on that poor rat. People blame that rat for everything that happens in this house nowadays. Who knows, there is perhaps no rat at all." (Narayan, "Flavour of Coconut," 22-23)

Ramu's astute observation challenges the household's knee-jerk reaction to blame the mouse for every mishap, highlighting the tendency to scapegoat and project blame onto convenient targets. His poignant reaction during the mouse's execution further underscores his compassionate nature: "The little boy scrambled to his feet when he heard footsteps in the corridor. He knew that the servant was coming to take the trap to the execution yard, and wondered for a second whether he should not run away from this sad spectacle, but he was overcome with a morbid curiosity, and followed the servant mutely as the rat-trap was picked up and taken out." (Narayan, "Flavour of Coconut," 24)

Through Ramu's internal conflict and ultimate decision to bear witness to the mouse's fate, Narayan poignantly captures the complexities of human compassion and curiosity in the face of adversity.

Similarly, in "Trail of the Green Blazer," Narayan explores the theme of empathy through the character of Raju, a pickpocket who experiences a moral awakening upon discovering balloons in the purse he has stolen. Moved by the thought of the disappointment that awaits the intended recipient, a child, Raju resolves to return the purse to its rightful owner. However, his attempt at redemption leads to his arrest, highlighting the consequences of his newfound conscience.

In "Sweets for Angels," Narayan further delves into the repercussions of empathy, as Kali's kind gesture of buying sweets for children leads to a tragic misunderstanding, resulting in his brutal beating by a misguided mob.

Through these interconnected stories, Narayan skillfully explores the complexities of human nature, depicting moments of moral awakening, compassion, and tragedy with sensitivity and insight.

In "Wife's Holiday," Narayan skillfully portrays the predicament faced by Kannan when his wife unexpectedly returns from her father's house, plunging him into a critical situation. The narrative poignantly captures Kannan's remorse as he reflects on his actions, particularly his decision to empty his son's money box for his own indulgence: "The story gives a touching description of the remorse felt by Kannan at emptying his son's money box and spending it on himself." (Lawley Road, page 127)

In "Four Rupees," Narayan employs humor to depict the ironic situation faced by Ranga, a jobless laborer, who finds himself reluctantly agreeing to pull a bucket from a deep well despite his lack of experience. The story humorously portrays Ranga's apprehensions and eventual success in his newfound task: "The story provides a very amusing description of Ranga's fears as he is made to slip down the well. Luckily his adventure proves successful and he earns four rupees as his wages." (Lawley Road, page 130)

In "The Antidote," Narayan delves into the mental turmoil experienced by an actor who is tasked with portraying death on stage on the very day astrologers predict his accidental demise. The story captures the actor's internal conflict and his relief upon realizing that he is not truly dead: "While agreeing to play the ominous role, he winks behind the crowd to assure himself that he is not dead." (Lawley Road, page 132)

Lastly, "Like the Sun" stands out as one of the most humorous stories in the collection. Narayan humorously depicts the trials of Sekhar, a teacher who resolves to practice absolute truth for a day, only to find himself in hot water with his wife and headmaster: "He



realizes the dangers of practicing truth and gives it up." (Lawley Road, page 139)

Through these stories, Narayan masterfully combines humor with insightful commentary on human nature, showcasing his ability to capture the complexities of everyday life with wit and empathy.

"Salt and Sawdust" serves as a captivating narrative and the title piece of the collection "Salt and Sawdust" (1993). Narayan, in his foreword to the book, reveals the anecdotal origin of the story, shared by a journalist from Holland. The tale revolves around a Dutch lady who, upon receiving jestful advice from her publisher to write a cookery book after submitting a laborious novel, takes the suggestion seriously. Narayan's Malgudi setting breathes life into the characters of Swami and Veena, a childless couple who become central figures in the drama of "Salt and Sawdust." "The poor wife cannot tell the difference between salt and sawdust when it comes to cooking and leaves her husband with no option but to cook himself." (Salt and Sawdust, page 1)

As the story unfolds, Swami contributes his own literary efforts to Veena's novel, penning ten pages dedicated to describing the lavish feast following the wedding of the hero and heroine. To their surprise, the publisher suggests publishing this section as a standalone book, which swiftly becomes a bestseller, much to Veena's delight and Swami's amusement. "The first book becomes an instant success and a best seller and keeps the press busy." (Salt and Sawdust, page 3)

However, despite the newfound success and Veena's subsequent hiring of a master cook, Swami harbors hopes of returning to the kitchen one day, while Veena remains optimistic about her novel seeing the light of day.

The story encapsulates Narayan's trademark wit and insight into human relationships, as well as his skill in weaving entertaining narratives with a touch of whimsy and charm. Through "Salt and Sawdust," Narayan offers a delightful exploration of marriage, creativity, and the unexpected paths life may take.

Narayan demonstrates his capability of crafting stories wherein humor arises from the situation itself. He adeptly utilizes a diverse array of humorous scenarios,

some of which may initially appear absurd but carry a profound moral impact for the reader. It can be inferred that Narayan aims to illustrate the potential consequences such situations might entail if they were to occur in real life.

4.2 Humour through Character in R.K.Narayan's works:

Narayan typically initiates his stories with a distinct idea of character and situation, allowing the plot to unfold along the logical progression he envisions. His characters predominantly hail from the middle class or lower middle class, possessing both common human virtues and weaknesses. "Dasi the Bridegroom," "Ranga," "A Change," "The One-Armed Giant," "Mother and Son," and "The Broken Pot" are exemplary stories from "Dodu and Other Stories." These narratives either depict peculiar characters revealing their inherent nature and qualities or highlight their mental states against the backdrop of unusual circumstances and life conditions.

In "Dasi the Bridegroom," Narayan presents a tragicomic tale of a simpleton who, having fallen victim to the pranks of his neighbors, descends into complete madness. With a light-headed demeanor and an earnest desire to find a bride, he is misled by others into believing that the town's prettiest actress, Bamini Bai, is his wife. When he attempts to woo her in the market, he is harshly rebuffed by her servants, leading to his ultimate mental breakdown. This story delves into the impact of love on an individual with abnormal tendencies, foreshadowing themes of obsessive love explored in Narayan's renowned novel, "Mr. Sampath."

Similarly, "Ranga" offers a character study of the indulged son of Kannan, a peon in the "M.S.M. Ry." offices. Spoiled and rebellious, Ranga shirks his studies and neglects his responsibilities. Following his father's demise, he struggles with poverty before securing a job as a bill collector in the shop of a benevolent middle-aged Christian, Mr. Jesudasan. However, influenced by a deceitful servant, he squanders his employer's money on horse races and eventually flees the town to escape his debts. Through Ranga's escapades, the story humorously portrays a child's evasion of responsibility and penchant for making excuses both at school and at home.



In "A Change," Narayan illustrates the impact of the machine age on human lives through the character of Sanad. Sanad, employed as a syce and a buggy puller, loses his job when his master acquires a car. Left with no alternative, Sanad purchases a tonga and a grey pony to earn a livelihood ferrying passengers. However, his livelihood is further threatened when buses enter into competition with him. Ultimately, Sanad realizes the futility of his struggle against machines and reluctantly sells his assets, turning to become a hawker. (p. 43).

"The One-Armed Giant" presents the sketch of a beggar with one arm, vividly capturing his eager anticipation for a promised coat from a young man. However, his hopes are dashed when the young man fails to fulfill his promise, leaving the beggar sorely disappointed. (p. 51).

"The Broken Pot" narrates the tragic tale of a family ruined by the callous behavior of a vile woman named Kali. The story poignantly depicts the plight of socially discarded and poverty-stricken individuals. (p. 64).

"Mother and Son" masterfully portrays the mental turmoil of a loving mother who becomes increasingly anxious when her son fails to return home one night. Narayan employs Chekhov's method of highlighting significant moments of consciousness in people's lives, skillfully exploring the mother's mounting agitation and concern. The following excerpt vividly illustrates her fevered thoughts and emotional turmoil: "Where could Ramu have gone? She began to feel uneasy... 'Sita Rama Rama...' But she ceased unconsciously... Poor boy..." (p. 128).

"Missing Mail," "The Doctor's Word," and "A Hero" are character-driven stories from "Cyclone and Other Stories," reminiscent of Chekhov's tales in their simplicity, precision, inconsequential humor, and simple pathos.

In "Missing Mail," Narayan portrays Thanappa, a simple and affectionate postman who becomes entangled in the lives of the recipients of the letters he delivers. His attachment to Kamakshi, the daughter of Ramanujam, is particularly notable. Thanappa's concern for her marriage mirrors that of her own father, and he even delays delivering a letter

informing Ramanujan of his uncle's illness to prevent any postponement of Kamakshi's wedding. (Page 33).

"The Doctor's Word" depicts the dilemma faced by the renowned doctor Raman when called to treat his best friend, Gopal. Despite knowing that Gopal's condition is terminal, Raman is compelled to lie to him, a departure from his usual honesty. Surprisingly, Gopal's condition improves upon hearing the false reassurance, leading to his survival. (p. 46).

"Dodu and his activities remind us of Swami in Narayan's first novel, Swami and Friends," particularly evident in "A Hero." Dodu, alongside his grandmother, sympathetic mother, and strict father, faces the challenge of sleeping alone in a room. Unforeseen circumstances, including encountering a burglar, turn him into an inadvertent hero. However, Dodu remains hesitant to repeat the experience, preferring the comfort of sleeping beside his grandmother. (p. 57).

"The Gateman's Gift," found in "An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories," revolves around Govind Singh, a former gateman who transitions to making toys. His world is turned upside down when he receives a registered letter from his former workplace, causing him great anxiety and confusion. He hesitates to open it, fearing the worst, and becomes almost distraught, seeking reassurance from everyone he encounters. Eventually, he learns from the office accountant that the letter contains a reward of one hundred rupees from the general manager, appreciating a clay model Govind Singh had gifted. Relieved but disillusioned, Govind Singh decides to abandon toy making, deeming it an unsuitable occupation for a sane person. (p. 78).

"Fellow Feeling," also from "An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories," delves into the character of a bully who harasses Rajam Iyer and other passengers in a train compartment. Despite threats of violence from Rajam Iyer, the bully continues his antics until Rajam Iyer suggests he will use ju-jitsu on him. Fearing the consequences, the bully hastily exits the train at the next station. (p. 89).

"All Avoidable Talk" and "Fruition at Forty" further explore character dynamics from the same collection. In the former, Sastri struggles to remain silent under the advice of an astrologer, enduring various



humiliations to avoid unnecessary conversation. In the latter, Rama Rao abandons plans to celebrate his forty-first birthday after losing his purse to a pickpocket, realizing the insignificance of such celebrations without financial stability. (p. 103).

"Iswaran," featured in the same collection, offers a portrayal of a simple-minded young man who repeatedly fails his intermediate examination. In the previous year, he was so convinced of his failure that he didn't bother to check his results, spending his time watching back-to-back movies instead. Similarly, this year he contemplates suicide by drowning himself in the river but decides to check his exam results first. To his astonishment, he discovers that he passed with second-class honors, filling him with overwhelming joy. In a frenzy of ecstasy, he jumps into the river to cross it but tragically drowns in his attempt. (p. 19).

"Half-a-Rupee Worth" from "Lawley Road and Other Stories" recounts the tragic demise of Subbiah, a rice merchant involved in black marketeering during World War II. When Subbiah fails to return from his secret godown one evening, a customer seeking rice for their starving children goes to his house, only to find him missing. After a search, Subbiah is discovered dead beneath a heap of rice bags in the godown, with an electric torch and a half-rupee coin nearby. The inquest rules his death as an accident caused by the toppling of rice bags. (p. 40).

Subbiah's character is a blend of archetype and individuality, vividly brought to life through Narayan's description of his hoarding practices and deception of both the government and the public. From his early days in his father's rice shop to his own methods of deceit, Narayan masterfully depicts the evolution of Subbiah's greed, culminating tragically in his demise. The story's conclusion is marked by irony, showcasing Narayan's adept use of literary techniques to craft a compelling narrative.

"In 'An Astrologer's Day,' from 'Cyclone and Other Stories' (1943), Narayan adeptly demonstrates how he combines situation and character to achieve the most humorous effect. This story, also the title piece of the collection published in 1947, revolves around the principle of simple irony of circumstance, leading to the shock of discovery or surprise at the end" (Naik, 93).

A fake astrologer encounters a man named Guru Nayak, whom he had once quarreled with in his village and attempted to kill. Fearing that Guru Nayak is dead, the astrologer fled his village and settled in his current location as an astrologer. However, Guru Nayak survived and is now seeking revenge. When Guru Nayak confronts the astrologer, challenging him to predict his future, the astrologer recognizes him, while Guru Nayak remains unaware. Persisting, Guru Nayak demands his fortune, leading the astrologer to recount a gruesome incident involving the astrologer himself as the protagonist. Surprised to hear his own name, Guru Nayak is told by the astrologer that the man he seeks is dead, crushed under a lorry, and advises him to return home immediately, warning of great danger if he ventures out again (p. 6).

Despite meeting the man he has sought for revenge, Guru Nayak fails to recognize him. For the astrologer, the shock of discovery brings both humor and relief, as he is freed from the guilt of blood that has haunted him for years. The astrologer is among the most memorable characters created by Narayan. Possessing a shrewd mind, he has "a working analysis of mankind's troubles... within five minutes he understood what was wrong" and "never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices" (p. 3). Furthermore, the ironic setting in which he conducts his business, "in semi-darkness, trying to throw light on the future of others while being in the dark about his own," adds to the humor (Page 2). The bustling street, dimly lit by shop lights and the glow of lamps from street vendors, is vividly described: "It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life" (p. 2).

This story exemplifies Narayan's skill in blending situation and character while also creating a humorous atmosphere. He adeptly establishes "an instant contact between reader and writer" with the opening, and the ending demonstrates "a strong influence of O. Henry's celebrated technique of the trick finale" (Naik, p. 100).

Some of Narayan's finest characters are found in his novels. Swaminathan, the young protagonist of "Swami and Friends," is the first among a series of



immortal characters created by Narayan. Episodic in nature, much of Narayan's own childhood experiences are woven into this novel. Graham Greene hails it as "a book in ten thousand," noting its complete objectivity and a humor reminiscent of Chekhov, coupled with an underlying sense of beauty and sadness (v). The opening paragraph, rich in situational and character humor, sets the tone: "It was Monday morning. Swaminathan was reluctant to open his eyes. He considered Monday specially unpleasant in the calendar. After the delicious freedom of Saturday and Sunday, it was difficult to get into the Monday mood of work and discipline. He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class-teacher; and the headmaster with his thin long cane..." (p. 1).

Humor emanates when Swami's peculiar character, ever-active imagination, and temperament interact with the situation, often exaggerating things, and through serio-comic infantile reflections, such as when Swami ponders his class master's unattractive appearance while the latter corrects homework, or when Swami attempts to comprehend the political map of Europe. Additionally, humor springs forth when Swami and his friends attempt to mimic the adult world, which appears bizarre to their innocent eyes. Shared laughter forms the basis of Swami's friendship with Samuel: "The bond between them was laughter. They were able to see together the same absurdities and incongruities in things. The most trivial and unnoticeable things would tickle them to death" (p. 9). When Swami focuses on an incongruity or absurdity, his mood is one of dedicated seriousness, prompting the reader to laugh at both the given absurdity and the boy's mock heroic stance. His discussion with his Granny about cricket serves as an interesting example of how Narayan contrasts the adult and child viewpoints through comic irony. In this situation, there is an ironic reversal of roles, with Swami administering admonitions and lectures, while Granny is reduced to the status of a child.

A persistent ironic tone runs throughout the novel. Even the title of the novel is ironic, giving the impression of a respectable and bearded religious man and his friends. Narayan sometimes adopts the approach of an insider, akin to Leacock's narrator in "Sunshine Sketches," and presents things as they appear to boys. At other times, Narayan acts as the omniscient narrator, offering ironic comments on what Swami sees and does.

M.K. Naik observes that this technique provides far greater scope for the exercise of irony, and Narayan employs it effectively to reveal several facets of schoolboy psychology with a tolerant smile (p. 5).

Srinivas and Mr. Sampath are the two central characters in the novel "Mr. Sampath," subtitled "The Printer of Malgudi." Srinivas is the founder-editor of the Malgudi journal "The Banner," which attempted to rectify the world within its twelve pages. His avowed intention of "attacking pigheadedness wherever found" and "prodding humanity into pursuing an ever-receding perfection" is ironic (p. 6). The editor, aiming to instruct the world, becomes a puppet in the hands of his printer, Mr. Sampath, described as a dominating and aggressive man, "innocently crooked, cunningly foolish, unselfishly selfish, sadly cheerful" (Mehta, p. 242). Mr. Sampath undertakes to print the journal and handles all the associated work. However, an unforeseen strike by the workers halts its publication.

Mr. Sampath decides to produce a film and persuades Srinivas to write the script. "Sunrise Picture Studio" is established, and their first venture is "The Burning of Kama," adapted from mythology. Mr. Sampath, portraying Lord Shiva, falls in love with the heroine, Shanti. Ravi, a young artist, also falls for her. During the shooting of a dance sequence, Ravi becomes uncontrollable, rushes onto the scene, grabs the heroine, and carries her off. In the ensuing melee, significant damage is done to the set and equipment, leading to the end of the film venture.

Srinivas revives the publication of his journal, while Mr. Sampath takes Shanti to a bungalow at Mempo Hills. After a few days, they separate, and she returns to Madras. To escape creditors, Sampath also leaves Malgudi.

"Mr. Sampath" can be seen as the first of a line of money-hunting rogues that Narayan created in his later novels. Despite his weaknesses and defects, Mr. Sampath is obliging and does all the work for others except his printing. "But above all towers the personality of Mr. Sampath going from one adventure to another, facing his failures with equanimity, cheating some, obliging others, always optimistic, always unscrupulous, always full of ready-witted cunning excuses and always at home with everybody" (Mehta, p.243).



Srinivas, on the other hand, is accustomed to a leisurely routine, but his journal keeps him busy. He often indulges in philosophical speculations on human relationships and life, often acting as a foil to Mr. Sampath. He proclaims that The Banner has nothing special to note about any war, past or future, meaning the World War, but “it is only concerned with the war that is always going on between man’s inside and outside. Till the forces are equalized, the struggle will always go on” (p. 6, “Mr. Sampath”). Similarly, when the owner of the house asks Srinivas, “Who’re you?” his reply is, “it is a profound question. What mortal can answer it” (p. 9, “Mr. Sampath”). The example above shows that Narayan has a peculiar way of blending the serious and the trivial, which is supposed to be the essence of humour.

“The Financial Expert” can aptly be called Narayan’s first masterpiece, and Margayya his greatest comic creation. Margayya is an obscure middleman who ekes out a living by sitting under the banyan tree in front of the Land Mortgage Bank and helping the villagers with their loans. One day he is humiliated by the bank secretary, and he determines to grow rich. He seeks the advice of a priest who recommends a long ritual for forty days to propitiate the Goddess of wealth. His luck turns. He meets one Dr. Pal, an eccentric sociologist, who sells him a pornographic book called “Bed Life”. Margayya changes the title to “Domestic Harmony” and publishes it and makes big money. He becomes the “Wizard of finance,” as Leacock loved to call his character Tomlinson. His business flourishes and his passion for money turns into an obsession, and then a mania. But when he sees that his son is being spoiled by Dr. Pal, the inevitable crash comes. He quarrels with Dr. Pal who instigates hundreds of Margayya’s customers who withdraw their deposits, thus producing a run on the bank. This ruins Margayya completely and he files an insolvency petition and goes back to his old place, carrying his old tin box, in front of the bank. Like Jefferson Thorpe, Margayya too, after riding on the crust of the wave, is back again where he started. But he is not greedy or wicked. Narayan, like Leacock, has humanized him and shows that despite his lust for money, he is a human being, just like one of us.

The irony of fate can be seen at work in the life and career of Margayya. Multiple layers of irony can be found in the title of the novel. Is he really a financial expert as the title indicates? Fate, aided by human

efforts, makes an obscure middleman a financial expert and later, abetted by human error, reduces the financial expert to his former puny stature.

Again, the very name of the protagonist is ironic. His real name is Krishna, but people call him ‘Margayya’, which means ‘one who shows the way’, because he shows the way to obtain a loan from the bank and also helps those who are in financial trouble. The irony is that he who shows the way to others, himself loses the way and ends up as a bankrupt. Irony operates at every stage of Margayya’s rise and fall. The finest stroke of irony occurs in the final episode where Balu, repentant and shaken, returns to Margayya’s house. His advice to his son is to go to the banyan tree in front of the bank: “Go there, that is all I can say: anything may happen thereafter... If you are not going, I am going on with it, as soon as I am able to leave this bed” (p. 173, “The Financial Expert”). M. K. Naik observes that the key-words “anything can happen thereafter” suggests that in spite of his traumatic experience, Margayya remains unchanged. He is still hopeful that the next turn of the wheel of fortune will again restore his dream. This only underscores the fundamental irony of human nature—viz, that one learns little from experience.

William Walsh refers to Narayan’s novels as ‘comedies of sadness,’ a description particularly fitting for “The Guide” (1958), which narrates the tale of Raju, a stall-keeper on the railway platform turned railway guide. One day, Rosie the dancer and her husband Marco arrive in Malgudi and employ Raju as a guide. While Marco is preoccupied with his archaeological studies, Raju seduces Rosie. Marco discovers their affair, leading to their separation. Raju lives with Rosie and elevates her to a very popular dancer. He indulges in a lavish lifestyle, drinking and gambling with his friends. In an attempt to obtain valuable jewelry belonging to Rosie’s husband, Raju forges her signature, resulting in his imprisonment. Rosie departs Malgudi and returns to Madras.

After spending two years in jail, Raju seeks refuge in a deserted temple in a village on the banks of the river Sarayu, a few miles away from Malgudi. Mistaken for a saint by the villagers, they worship him and offer numerous gifts of food. Raju embraces his new role as a saint, finding comfort and contentment. However, an ironic reversal occurs when a severe drought hits the village. Due to a misunderstanding



prompted by Velan, the villagers believe Raju is fasting to bring rain. Raju finds himself trapped: "Sainthood has now become a prison from which there is no escape for the victim" (p. 157, "The Guide"). Raju becomes acutely aware of the comic and tragic dimensions of his situation as a holy man. He rises to the occasion, recalling his mother's belief that the rains would come for the sake of one good man and benefit the entire village. Accepting the villagers' devotion and faith, Raju plays the role of the savior, understanding that profound sacrifice is necessary to earn divine favor. On the twelfth day of his fast, exhausted, Raju collapses, just as signs of rain appear on the distant horizon. The novel concludes ambiguously, leaving uncertainty about whether Raju is truly deceased or has merely fainted, thereby ending on a note of ambiguity.

Throughout the novel, Raju undergoes a maturation process, evolving from a stall owner to a tourist guide, lover, manager, swindler, jailbird, and ultimately a Swami who attains martyrdom. Such a transformation is facilitated by Raju's strong personality and inherent good qualities, rendering him "a kind of anti-hero, Narayan's common man with the potential for the uncommon" (Narasimhiah, p. 158). In "The Guide," Narayan's humor intertwines with tragedy, reaching Shakespearean heights.

The irony of fate pervades Raju's life, as indicated by the title itself. This comic irony evolves into somber tragic irony, culminating in Raju's demise (Naik, 54). The events leading to Raju's forced ascension to sainthood are imbued with irony and humor. The depiction of the fair during Raju's fast is steeped in irony—shops spring up around the shrine, and festivities abound with people eating, drinking, and reveling. The juxtaposition of tragedy and irony creates a bitter humor.

In "The Man-Eater of Malgudi" (1962), Vasu, the ruthless taxidermist, arrives in Malgudi drawn by the wild animals of Mempo Hills. Natraj, the benevolent printer, and his friends find their peaceful days disrupted by Vasu's arrival, along with his stuffed hyenas and pythons, as he occupies the upstairs of Natraj's printing press. Vasu sets his sights on the temple elephant, intending to shoot it during a festival procession. Ironically, while waiting for the elephant, he strikes his forehead to kill a mosquito and inadvertently kills himself with the force of his blow—a spectacular and incredible ending unique in Narayan's works. The story,

blending realism with fantastic romance, is bizarre yet captivating.

Vasu, a hysterically powerful man devoid of scruples, lacks understanding of gratitude or obligation. Formerly a wrestler turned taxidermist, he embodies the archetype of a demon from mythology, with his imposing physique and sinister demeanor. Natraj fittingly dubs him "the prince of darkness." Towards the novel's conclusion, Shastri elucidates the moral of Vasu's abrupt and violent demise: evil, no matter how triumphant, ultimately self-destructs. Narayan's comic inventiveness, manifested through both situation and character, not only provides comic relief but also enriches the narrative's depth and impact.

Once again, the novel's title underscores Narayan's ironic intentions. "The man-eater" in this context does not refer to a tiger but to a tiger-killer, although he is also metaphorically a "man-eater" in a different sense (Naik, 65). Unlike traditional hunting stories where the man-eater is typically killed, here the man-eater, Vasu, meets his end by his own hand. Vasu epitomizes belligerent egotism: rude, unmannerly, proud, cruel, and physically powerful.

Throughout the novel, there exists an ironic contrast and parallelism between Vasu's demoniacal, self-centered egotism and Natraj's ineffectual, self-effacing altruism. This dichotomy extends to their temperaments, with Vasu exhibiting temerity and Natraj demonstrating timidity (Naik, 70-71).

R.K. Narayan's characters possess a unique blend of individuality and archetypal qualities, contributing to their lifelike portrayal within his narratives. Unlike Leacock's characters, which often serve as caricatures or representations of societal types, Narayan's characters transcend mere typification, embodying distinct personal attributes while still reflecting broader social norms and values.

Narayan's deep understanding of human psychology enables him to create characters that feel authentic and relatable. Through a dramatic method of character depiction, he allows his characters to unfold naturally, revealing different facets of their personalities through their actions and dialogue (Narayan, *The Guide*, p. 148). This approach imbues his characters with depth



and complexity, making them more than mere caricatures or stereotypes.

Moreover, Narayan's characters often serve as agents of action, driving the narrative forward through their choices and interactions. Chance and coincidence frequently play a role in shaping their destinies, adding layers of complexity to their development (Narayan, *The Guide*, p. 104). By focusing on the protagonist's journey and the characters directly involved in it, Narayan creates a narrative that feels grounded in reality while still allowing for moments of humor and irony.

Overall, Narayan's characters are not confined to rigid archetypes or societal roles but instead emerge as fully realized individuals with their own unique quirks, desires, and motivations. Through his skillful character development, Narayan brings his narratives to life, creating a rich and immersive reading experience for his audience.

5. CONCLUSION:

The exploration of humor in situations and characters within R.K. Narayan's selected works unveils a rich tapestry of wit, irony, and cultural insight. Narayan's mastery of the comedic form is evident in his ability to seamlessly blend humor with profound observations on human nature and societal dynamics.

Through his characters, Narayan captures the essence of Indian life with warmth and authenticity. Each character, whether larger-than-life or seemingly ordinary, possesses a unique blend of quirks and idiosyncrasies that contribute to the overall comedic atmosphere of the narrative. From the bumbling Swami in "Swami and Friends" to the ambitious Margayya in "The Financial Expert," Narayan's characters come alive on the page, eliciting both laughter and empathy from readers.

Furthermore, Narayan's keen eye for situational humor allows him to deftly navigate the complexities of everyday life in India. Whether it's the misadventures of Raju in "The Guide" or the absurdities of small-town politics in "Malgudi Days," Narayan infuses his narratives with a delightful sense of whimsy and irony. Through his storytelling, Narayan invites readers to reflect on the absurdities of the human condition while also celebrating the resilience and humor inherent in everyday life.

In conclusion, R.K. Narayan's exploration of humor in situations and characters serves as a testament to his status as one of India's foremost literary figures. His ability to infuse his narratives with wit, irony, and cultural insight not only entertains readers but also offers profound insights into the complexities of Indian society. As such, Narayan's works continue to resonate with readers around the world, cementing his legacy as a master storyteller and humorist.

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