

The Lyre and the Load of the Ledger: R. K. Narayan and the Tragic Figure of “Gopal, the B.A.”

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Abstract:

This article analyses the tension between literary ambition and pecuniary pressure in the early life of the litterateur R. K. Narayan. Focusing on the author’s short story “Sketches from Life: Gopal, the B.A.,” the article examines the tragic travails of its protagonist, Gopal, who abandons his literary ambitions under the burdensome weight of material needs and becomes a bank clerk. The paper centres on a comparative study of Gopal’s shattering surrender and Narayan’s unalloyed allegiance to the writing profession, as recorded in his autobiographical memoir *My Days* and other biographical accounts. By examining how the author resolutely resists social pressure to follow the common, conventional commercial path—such as stepping away from postgraduate studies to preserve his affection for literature—the article shows how he eventually establishes himself as a luminous litterateur in early 20th-century Indian literature in English. Ultimately, the study shows how Narayan’s rock-ribbed, creative resilience subverts the un-aesthetic, utilitarian realities that muted many aspiring Indian writers of his generation, and how this herculean effort to establish himself as an author of note becomes a light for posterity to be perennially inspired by.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, Gopal, Commercial Necessity, Artistic Idealism, Indian English Fiction, Autonomy, Writerly Identity.

Introduction: The Institutional Matrix of Indian English Literature

The study and production of English literature in India have long been marked by a delicate—and often agonising—tension between artistic aspiration and the demands of material survival. While the college life of a student—a life which is more or less unburdened by the burden of imminent employment—provides an ambiance befitting for early devotion to higher literary ambitions, the moment he bears the burden of a Bachelor of Arts on his back, the phantom of a fiscally fortified future for meeting the odds and ends to secure the survival of his substantial self in this commercial world, more often than not, poisons the carefree collegian who loved to be forever lost in the printed pages of a book of poesy and dreamt of being a poet himself in times to come; and the moment this poisoning takes place, it perforce petrifies his person into the garb of a pecuniary professional, performing the duties of a clerk, a banker, a station master, a teacher, a professor, et cetera, et cetera. Thus, the creative spirit—the lyre, symbolising artistic ambition—within a Bachelor of Arts is gradually numbed and eventually silenced by the relentless pressure to earn a livelihood. Over time, the demands of practical survival bury artistic dreams beneath the weight of utilitarian necessity. The shift from undergraduate idealism to economic compulsion often silences aspiring creative voices. In the early twentieth century, when our country was still recoiling under the crushing clutch of British imperial colonialism, creative writing was rarely recognised as a viable primary profession; a Bachelor of Arts in English literature was rather viewed primarily as a mere professional degree designed to produce administrative personnel, bank clerks, and middle-tier civil servants for running the engine of the colonial bureaucracy.

This systemic conflict between artistic vocation and monetary safety is memorably dramatised in an early short fiction of R. K. Narayan (1906–2001). In his poignant yet frequently overlooked short story "Sketches from Life: Gopal, the B.A.," Narayan captures the quiet tragedy of an ambitious young graduate whose poetic aspirations and literary sensibilities

are systematically worn down by economic necessity, culminating in a tedious, spirit-crushing clerical career in banking. Gopal represents an entire socio-cultural demographic of his era: educated youth with rich aesthetic potential who lack the financial cushioning or structural independence to resist the crushing apparatus of commercial necessity.

However, what makes Narayan's overall contribution to Indian English letters particularly extraordinary is that his own life trajectory presented a radical, direct refusal of Gopal's fate. Unlike his fictional protagonist, Narayan consistently chose literary devotion instead of economic safety, resisting both institutional academia and conventional white-collar employment. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar famously observes, Narayan as an author stands alone among the Indian writers in English of his time to subsist entirely by the power of his creative pen:

Like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan too has somehow managed (with what difficulties and trials we do not know) to remain a writer. Anand has some political axes to grind, though these do not offensively intrude into his creative writing. But Narayan has no axes of any kind: he is that rare thing in India today, a man of letters pure and simple. (Iyengar 358)

This paper therefore explores how "the lyre"—a symbol of creative ambition, poetic inspiration, and artistic independence—stands in tension with "the load of the ledger," which represents the practical, bureaucratic, and financial demands of modern life. By analysing Narayan's early work and biography, the study clarifies how these opposing forces shape the lives of aspiring writers in colonial India. Through an exhaustive close textual reading of "Sketches from Life: Gopal, the B.A.," alongside autobiographical evidence from *My Days* (1974) and secondary biographical commentary, this study shows how Narayan used his

personal conviction to subvert the utilitarian realities that claimed the creative lives of many of his contemporaries.

Section 1: The Anatomy of Gopal's Surrender in "Sketches from Life"

In "Sketches from Life: Gopal, the B.A.," Narayan meticulously constructs a moving allegory of the artistic drive crushed under the burden of commercialism. The narrative introduces Gopal as the quintessential liberal arts graduate of colonial India—imbued with high aesthetic ideals, nourished on the canonical works of Western literature, and harbouring earnest, noble ambitions of a literary life. A deep, romantic sensibility and an instinctive resistance to the mechanical routines of corporate and administrative careers define Gopal's early identity. His university years are depicted as an idyllic space where the mind is permitted to soar above material considerations, into a utopia of one's own passions:

He has passed his BA and taken his degree. The two letters BA are like two wings and are expected to confer on him powers of flight. He is no longer looked on as a fledgling in the nest. People ask him what he proposes to do with himself. He replies, 'I am going to be a writer...' People laugh on hearing this. 'Ever heard of a person wanting to live by his pen! It is alright as a hobby. In my undergraduate days I too used to write a great deal, and Mark Hunter and Kellet complimented me on my command of the language...' says an elderly gentleman. 'Writing is no profession. You can't...' But Gopal has grand faith in himself and idealism. 'I can somehow make ten rupees a month with my writings. I can live quite comfortably on ten rupees a month, because I am not going to marry. (Narayan 219)

At this point, we find Gopal following his ambition with an almost fanatical resolve, mirroring the fortitude of his creator, R. K. Narayan. Furthermore, the fiction unfolds how the fancy of this poet sallies forth in several verses that he copiously composes but, to the utmost

sorrow of the poet, when he comes to realise that the publishers he sends copies of his poetry to for publication shun to show any proclivity for publishing his poems, he condescends to write in prose. But even this attempt by the poet-protagonist proves fruitless. Although publishers praise the admirable qualities of his articles, their compliments are hollow—they still refuse to publish his work. To stoop himself further to this alluring cause of making himself appear in print, he even dovetails his writing with the desires and demands of the publishers he frequents by painstakingly pursuing such practical books on the proposition of getting into print as *How to Sell Your Manuscripts and Writers' and Artists' Year Book*, and shadowing the suggestions he gleans therefrom sedulously. However, even this arduous attempt, eventually, proves abortive. Up to this juncture, Gopal's is so singularly similar to that of Narayan's that we forthwith come to feel that it is the writer himself who is ventriloquizing his own singular discomfort, doubts, and dilemma concerning his desire to become a writer through the conduit of this character. However, Gopal is not Narayan. He is not composed of the invincible individuality that had armoured his author to withstand adversities, the dearth of which ultimately succumbs his suffering-self getting fossilised into one of those fiscal functions that many of his ilk, more often than not, have turned out to be:

Gopal goes back to his town with the green trunk. In due course the ten or fifteen lines of review appear in print, for which he waits and watches at the free reading-room table. He is elated to see himself in print after all. And this is the end of his literary ambition and career. Within a year or two he is reduced to the state when he will be grateful for any work that will relieve him of the tedium of existence and bring him thirty or forty rupees. (Narayan 221)

The tedium of existence of this man who has failed to be a writer of worth in the eyes of the world eventually comes to an end at the penultimate conclusion of the story, where we find him engaged in a bank on thirty-five rupees a month. This sunless summary of the

protagonist's fate—which accounts for the death of the author within him, with whom he had so intimately identified—subtly saddens us. Gopal is now a quadragenarian, and upon his back rests the inexorable burden of ensuring the sustenance and security of his wife and children. The years have not only aged his body but have also compounded his obligations: where once the lyre of poetic ambition sang within him, now the load of familial responsibility presses with a gravity that renders his former literary aspirations a distant, elusive memory. Thus, he sits in the bank from ten to six, poring over voluminous ledgers, and it is truly disheartening to witness how the spirit that once carolled in creative composition is now entirely calcified into the mechanical routine of a clerk, absorbed in the dreary correction of debits and credits that constitute the commerce of his existence:

These are the solid realities of existence now- ledgers and family. Looking back, literary life appears as a vapoury day-dream, and very soon the green trunk is forgotten and vanishes under a pile of other articles in the lumber room.” (Narayan 221-222)

Thus ends the story of Gopal, the BA, with his literary ambition buried under the burden of “the Ledger.” It saddens us to see the hands—which once loved to hold pen and draft poesies—cuffed to keep precise records of financial transactions that bear no relation to his innermost being.

Through Gopal, Narayan captures a widespread cultural phenomenon in our society: the systemic conversion of creative potential into commercial value. Gopal's tragedy lies not in a dearth of literary talent or passion, but in his vulnerability to external validation and economic fear. What he conspicuously lacks is the stubborn inner fortitude required to endure extended unemployment and social opprobrium for the sake of art. Consequently, he becomes a symbol for an entire generation of educated Indian youth whose creative voices are dominated by the imperatives of instant financial utility.

Section 2: Against the common current: Narayan's Counter-Trajectory in My Days

Gopal is a man of common sense, as men in general are. Guided by this common sense, he condescends himself, as the mediocre often do, from his platonic platform of becoming a poet to bear the burden of becoming a banker. A series of setbacks in his curtailed literary career of selling flowers of fiction in this fiscal world has sadly schooled him in the lesson that the world of commerce he verily belongs to is not congenial to the cultivation of the craft of culling coins for one's commercial concerns by the mere means of fabricating fictions and composing carols. However, the Bachelor of Arts whom the world has come to know as the maker of the ever-mesmerising Malgudi, whatever else he be, was not a common man to be contaminated and corrupted by this commonsense that calcifies a Gopal into a means of commerce. He was not a man of the masses who loves something, and lives something else under the duress of pressing commercial conditions. This man of Malgudi—and it is marvellous to note how he managed to do so at all—lived what he loved, and loved what he loved to live. He loved to be a lover and architect of literature, and by dint of his invincible determination, he lived to be the same—a lover and architect of literature.

A person in love with something, we know, is a being possessed; for even though his substantial self is made of the same mundane matters that have minted this material world, so long as he is an amoretto, he possesses the reviving attributes of a phoenix, a mythical bird of the ancient Egyptian legends, which burns itself to ashes on the pyre, only to rise again from the ashes to live life afresh. Narayan's is of this very ilk, and it is the author's sheer affection for literature itself that—as Shakespeare famously writes that “Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds” (116.2-3)—kept him adamant amid the adversities that could easily have confounded the course of a commoner. The way our author does this is something that no common sense could ever conceive. Iyengar, in this respect, is absolutely right in his succinct but substantial verdict, quoted earlier, that silhouettes, in a couple of epithets—such as a “rare

thing”, “a man of letters pure and simple,”—the sublime substance of this sage of Indian English fiction who, despite his own sapping sorrows and suffering, stays steadfast in his service to tending to the sapling of Indian English Fiction. He is “simple,” because his English is scented with the soil of his own homeland; he is “pure,” because in spite of a plethora of pecuniary problems and personal traumatic tragedies (including the death of his wife, Rajam, and that of his only child, Hema) that he underwent, he never let his pen baulk and break under them; and that he is a “rare thing” can easily be evinced with respect to the fact that of the triumvirates of the 1930s, that is Anand, Narayan, and Raja Rao, who together constituted the terra firma for the fruition of the native fiction in the alien air of English, the one who really deserves to be embellished with the epithet of “a rare thing,” is Narayan itself who, lest his devotion to literature be forever lost by enrolling himself as a student of the post graduate course in English literature, the completion of which could easily have laurelled him with the lucrative job of a lecturer of English in a college, steps back from the threshold of the Maharaja College, and continues as Bachelor of Arts for the rest of his life:

Nineteen-thirty, when I attained a belated graduation, became a year of problems. What should one do with oneself now? Different suggestions came in from different quarters. One could become a lawyer, a minor civil servant, or something like that. At first I toyed with the idea of studying for an M.A. degree in literature and becoming a college lecturer. While I was going up the stairs of the Maharaja’s college with my application for a seat in the M.A. class, a friend met me halfway and turned me back, arguing that this would be a sure way to lose interest in literature. I accepted his advice and went downstairs, once for all turning my back on college studies. (Narayan 72)

This friend, as Susan Ram describes in her seminal biography of the author, was M.N. Parthasarathy, the elder brother of the author’s close companion Srinivas, and this latter, when

inquired by Susan, recounts his recollection concerning the event as had been reported to him by his brother as follows:

My brother had by then finished his MA in English literature. He asked Narayan, ‘Why are you going up?’ He said, ‘I want to register myself for the MA in English literature’. And my brother said—he was given to statements like that—‘You will lose all your love for English literature if you do MA Literature: don’t destroy your love for literature’. And the astonishing thing was that Narayan walked down with him and didn’t register! (Ram 91)

This rare adamance of the author to not get admitted to the postgraduate course in English literature lest his affection for literature be forever lost (which reveals Narayan’s radical resolve) is in close consonance with the extraordinary, ecstatic reaction of the author about his failure, not once, but twice in a row, to pass the university entrance examination. These twin flunks in the examination, which could easily have driven a common and conventional student into a mood of absolute desolation, drove Narayan into an Elysium of academic freedom to carve a course analogous to that rare “naughty boy” of Keats who:

For nothing would he do

But scribble poetry-

He took

An inkstand

In his hand

And a pen

Big as ten

In the other,

And away

In a pothole

He ran

To the mountains

And fountains

And ghosts

And posts

And witches

And ditches,

And wrote

In his coat...(lines 28-46)

——Narayan roamed likewise. With a pen and a note-book, and with a book of poesy and a bosom full of fancy, this “Chekhov of Indian English fiction” (an epithet that Graham Green embellishes our author with), fared on foot to the forests and the fields, the fountains and the mountains which, twined together, textured the mellifluousness of his native Mysore. In the course, he also came to discern the denizens dwelling there, and detect their myriad moods, motives, mores, and manners. The more he cogitated over the ambitions driving the denizens of this microcosm—a world of which he was himself an essential part—the more he found it teeming with material ripe for a lifetime of fiction writing. Having discovered this fertile fountainhead, this bachelor of arts let his fancy feed upon it, and, after a period of patient meditation, transmuted it into that marvellous multitude of the men and women who populated

the many-sided milieu of Malgudi—the men and women whose motives and mores sallied through a significant section of his narrative oeuvre.

However, the path to becoming a freelance writer was never smooth, and the author knew he had to pay a price. Specifically, this price involved living without a guaranteed monthly income, giving up hopes of financial security, and being unable to contribute financially to his joint family's needs. However, for the freedom of his pen, he was steadfast in paying this price too. In a radio talk on the topic "The Business of Authorship", the author, when asked why he became an author, replied:

I have often wondered about it myself and have at last hit upon a possible answer. I chose to be a writer mainly because it is the only career which guarantees absolute freedom to live as one pleases, stay or go where one pleases, without waiting for anyone's approval or sanction—freedom to sleep, read, walk, and above all turn to one's work only at one's pleasure. This indeed is the meaning of the word 'freedom', but there is a price to be paid for it. (Ram 98)

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Lyre in the world of Ledger

A comparative study of the author's character and that of the story's protagonist makes clear that Gopal's tragic conversion into a clerk represents the systemic success of the utilitarian world, where creative human capacity is subverted into financial resource. Narayan's life, however, stands in profound contrast to this system. He did not simply write fiction; he established the possibility of an independent, professional Indian writer who subsisted solely on creative prose in English. By choosing "the lyre" over "the ledger," Narayan proved that a writer could resist both domestic financial pressures and a utilitarian world bent on commodification, opening the path to the institutional emergence of Indian English fiction.

Gopal's tragic surrender to the bank ledger acts as a timeless warning against the uncritical absorption of creative minds into mechanical, utilitarian economic systems. His story reflects the silent extinction of countless artistic perspectives throughout Indian history—individuals who possessed the sensitivity of poets but lacked the structural or emotional strength to withstand socio-economic coercion. Gopal's life answers the haunting question of what happens when social pressure succeeds in taming the creative spirit.

Conversely, Narayan's own biography provides the triumphant answer to how that tragic script can be rewritten. By resisting the temptation of instant economic security, stepping away from postgraduate academia, and enduring the uncertainty of freelance creative writing, Narayan vindicated the dignity of the literary vocation in India. He demonstrated that "the lyre" need not be sacrificed to "the load of the ledger."

For modern researchers, literary scholars, and students traversing an increasingly commodified academic field, Narayan's example remains intensely relevant. His life and fiction remind us that genuine literary study and creative writing require an enduring devotion to humanistic principles—a willingness to reject pure utilitarianism in pursuit of imaginative truth. In reclaiming Gopal's story alongside Narayan's individual triumph, we recognise not only one of India's greatest canonical authors, but also the creative spirit's abiding strength.

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Endnotes

1. The historical background of the Bachelor of Arts degree in colonial South India—particularly during the 1920s and 1930s—was largely shaped by the administrative structures following Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835). In colonial India, the real reason for teaching English at the university level wasn't to nurture creative writers or artists. It was initially focused on training people for practical jobs—clerks, administrators, and bank staff—to keep the colonial machinery running. Because of this utilitarian approach, the possibility of pursuing creative writing in English as a serious, respected career was almost never considered.
2. R. K. Narayan's "Sketches from Life: Gopal, the B.A." was written early in his literary career and later published in *Indian Thought: A Miscellany*, a collection he edited himself. The narrative acts as a fictional parallel to the socio-economic anxieties Narayan navigated in Mysore after graduating from Maharaja's College in 1930.
3. For a comprehensive biographical account of Narayan's refusal to accept conventional employment—including his brief, unsuccessful stint as a schoolteacher before deciding to write full-time—see Susan Ram and N. Ram's *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906–1945* (Viking, 1996).

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