



R.K. NARAYAN'S LITERARY FORTE AS REVEALED IN THE USE OF MYTHS IN HIS FICTIONAL WORLD: AN APPRAISAL.

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Abstract

This article throws light on the literary forte of R.K. Narayan who had rendered various myths and legends drawn from the classical Indian traditional literature epics and tales such as The Mahabharata, The Bhagavatgita, Jataka Tales and the Panchatantra the world famous and internationally known collection of animal stories. This paper also analyses R.K. Narayan's characters with whom one can identify spontaneously. Despite the use of myth, it is the 'incredible universe' charged with 'moral imagination' that comes to us in the above unforgettable novels of the 'grand old man of Malgudi'.

The term "Indo-Anglian" is used to denote original literary creation in the English language by Indians. Today, there are a large number of educated Indians who use the English language as a medium for the expression of their experience of life. Their writing has now developed into substantial literature in its own right and it is this substantial body of literature which is referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. This writing has been enriched by such internationally recognized figures as Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh etc. Then, a number of eminent Indians like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, continued to write in English and Indo-Anglian literature continued to grow flourish and attain higher and higher peaks of excellence in the literary scenario.

No doubt, the Indo-Anglian novel emerged in its glory with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. These two literary giants carried the Indo-Anglian novel to great heights. While M.K. Anand is a North Indian, R.K. Narayan is a South Indian whose mother-tongue is Tamil. R.K. Narayan too has mastered the English language and his novels too belong to the first rank. He won many admirers in England and in the United States of America for his novels were translated into several Indian and foreign languages. Such a well-known novelist was born on October 10, 1906 at Rasipuram, the ancestral village in the district of Salem in Southern India. Born in the middle-class Tamil Saivite Brahmin family of Madras, he completed his schooling at the Maharaja's school, leading a more or less unsettled life in the early years of education and graduated at twenty four from Maharaja's college at Mysore. Narayan's family life, the milieu in which he was born and grew up and the social changes creeping into well-knit texture of Indian society, especially of the south, deeply influenced his vision as a novelist. He once told Ved Mehta:

"To be a good writer anywhere, you must have roots-both in religion and family.... I have these things. I am rooted to the right triangle of Madras, Mysore and Coimbatore none of them more than a couple of hundred miles distant from the others".

Quite unable to find a job suiting his qualifications and temperament, Narayan accepted a post as a teacher in a school but he could not adjust himself to the school routine and extra-curricular activities which he was required to perform and so he ran away to escape from it. The profession which he now adopted was that of a writer and that is the profession to which he stuck all his life. He continued writing novels and short stories at a steady pace. He has to his credit publication of such remarkable novels as 1. **Swami and Friends** (1935) 2. **The Bachelor of Arts** (1937) 3. **The Dark Room** (1938) 4. **The English Teacher** (1945) 5. **Mr. Sampath** (1949) 6. **The Financial Expert** (1952) 7. **Waiting for the Mahatma** (1955) 8. **The Man-Eater of Malgudi** (1961) 9. **The Vendor of Sweets** (1967) 10. **The Painter of Signs** (1977) 11. **The World of Nagaraj** (1990) and a good number of short stories.

Writing through the medium of the English language came as naturally to R.K. Narayan as leaves come to a tree. As he had received his education both at school and college through the medium of the English language, he was able to attain a rare proficiency in it. Regarded as one of the "Big Three" among the Indian novelists in English, R.K. Narayan has been admired by all lovers of literature for his remarkable gift for telling stories, portraying memorable people of small oddities and eccentricities and his humour. He is a classic teller of tales and an enduring appeal springs from his canvas where common man and woman of all times and places are joined in their simple pursuits. His real greatness lies in his portrayal of the human character in all its variety. Truly speaking, character-drawing is indeed, out and out his fictional forte, for he has created many such memorable characters as Swami, Sampath, Margayya, Raju, Vasu and Jagan, all of whom are mostly ordinary men and women taken from real life. The greatest point about his writing is its use of language and his talent goes



beyond more aptitude with words or a maverick Malgudi. Narayan stands for the immense flexibility, adoptability and élan of English.

Having no independent philosophy to propagate in his novels, he largely subscribes to the Hindu ideas enshrined in the ancient Hindu scriptures. A Healthy product of the Hindu high caste family, he shares the beliefs, superstitions, traditions, customs and rituals in Indian life. Hindu myths and ideals have gripped Narayan's mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in most of his novels. ours has been a traditional society, admitting and absorbing all change. The huge mass of myths and legends that we have accumulated through centuries has become the common repository of the people of the land. These myths and legends have shaped our minds and imagination, behavior pattern and general attitude that it finds unconsciously full expression in the very aspect of his writing. William Walsh is worth quoting when he says, "The religious sense of Indian myth is part of Narayan's grip of reality, of his particular view of human life and his individual way of placing and ordering human felling and experience" (Walsh 166)

Myths come down from remote past and they project life and values quite different from the modern view point for myths are responses to basic human situations and instincts and the use of myths in creative writings enables man to unravel and understand the multidimensional complexities of human mind. Myths are about Gods, Goddesses, Super humans, Sages, Rakshasas, populating our psychological, spiritual and superstitions worlds. To understand them is in a way to understand ourselves because of the readymade framework, to make the people easily believe in the story and writers opt for myths as important components in their themes and plots. R.K. Narayan's use of myth is cosmic, characterized by irony. He never used fragments of various myths. He used only one myth in a novel and almost all his novels project Indian Religious faith, coupled with his gentle humour neatly acting as a spice and making his novels appeal to all kinds of readers in India and abroad. Shyam M. Asnani holds rather rightly

".... his works transcend the narrow political, social and cultural frontiers
and embrace human values that are valid for all times and all climes" (P30)

Truly speaking, R.K. Narayan creates characters with whom one can identify spontaneously. Swami, Krishna, Chandran, Ramani, Suseela and Savitri and even numberless minor characters are easily recognizable because they are based on real life models. The use of tales from the Hindu mythology, the teachings of the Bhagavadgita and the austere religious practices and beliefs have ordained additional strength to the fictional art of R.K. Narayan. These kinds of mythic allusion help the readers with a better understanding of that particular character and a deeper insight into human nature. It is in this context that Narayan's skillful use of myth makes reality more easily comprehensible. As Ian Milligan rightly says, "the novelists like Narayan continually add to the richness of our human experience; they bring before us new topics, new characters, new attitudes" (P2). **The Financial Expert** narrates the story of Margayya, a financier. As his name indicates, he shows the way for illiterate, poor peasants to draw loans from the bank and from each other. He conducts his business in front of the Central Cooperative Bank under the shade of a banyan tree with his tin box in which he carried his entire equipment consisting of an ink bottle, a pen, a blotter, a small red covered register and loan application forms. Despite warnings from the Bank's Secretary not to indulge in illegal possession of the application forms, Margayya continues with his financial business. To Markayya,

"Money alone is important in this world. Everything else will come to us
naturally if we have money in our purse" (The Financial Expert 21)

He often reflected on the power of money:

"People did anything for money. Money was man's greatest need like air
or food. People went to horrifying lengths for its sake, like collecting
rent on a dead body – it left him admiring the power and dynamism of
money, its capacity to make people do strange deeds" (FE 28)

Obsessed with the thought of money, Margayya falls a victim to its overbearing influence. His immediate concern was to attain material benefits such as unlimited affluence, foreign studies for Balu, his only son, his possible marriage with a judge's daughter and the realization of aristocrats in his family filled his mind night and day. His only salvation lay in acquiring the riches he coveted. The best way to fulfill his desire, he presumed, would be to consult the temple priest. Margayya sought the priest out and waited very patiently for an opportunity to confide in him. The priest tells Margayya the significance of Puja (ritual worship conducted to appease the Hindu Pantheon of gods or goddesses) to obtain one's aims and objectives. Margayya, as he sat in the sanctorum, reflects on the image of Hanuman, the God of power, the son of Wind. According to Narayan's Gods, Demons and others,



“Even the legends and myths, as contained in the Puranas... are mere illustrations of the moral and spiritual truths enunciated in the Vedas ... each forms a part and parcel of a total life and is indispensable for the attainment of a four-square understanding of existence” (2)

When Margayya refuses to drink the tumbler of milk, the priest admonishes him thus:

“Milk is one of the forms of Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. When you reject it or treat it indifferently, it means you reject her. She is a Goddess, who always stays on the tip of her toes all the time, ever ready to turn and run away. There are ways of wooing and keeping her. When she graces a house with her presence, the master of the house becomes distinguished, famous and very wealthy” (FE 35)

Markayya’s reaction is typical. He

“Revently touched the tumbler and very respectfully drank milk, taking care not to spill even a drop”

The priest also relates the story of Kubera, from the Mahabharata, who had to go through an arduous penance in order to atone the spilling of a drop of milk on the floor of his palace. Quite unable to hold back any longer, Margayya requests the priest:

“I want to acquire wealth. Can you show me a way? I will do anything you suggest” (P36)

Margayya’s attitude is a good example of the human tendency of becoming desperate to realize one’s ambitions, often overlooking, the adverse effects of pursuing them. The priest comes up with a solution to Margayya’s problem, he suggests:

“You should propitiate Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. When she throws a glance on someone, he becomes rich... prosperous, he is treated by the world as an eminent man, his words are treated as something of importance” (P50)

There was a lull in Margayya’s fortune making. He prospered as a financier:

“People borrowed from him only under stress.... Margayya was the one man who lent easily. He made the least fuss about the formalities, but he charged interest in so many subtle ways and compounded it so deftly that the moment a man signed his bonds, he was more or less finished” (183)

The irony of the narrative is that while Margayya amassed wealth, he lost his mental and physical health. His son Balu turns out to be a loafer. His one time friend, philosopher and guide Dr. Pal plays traitor in his later life by ruining his business as a means to avenge his injured pride. Once again Margayya stands penniless. One wonders at the way things turn out for Markayya despite the elaborate and painstaking Lakshmi Puja. One can conclude that Narayan tries to reconstruct the oft observed pattern in reality that the material assets are of no use if the basic integrity and sympathy are lost and if one’s attitude in gaining riches is selfish Rajaji’s concluding remarks of his Ramayana aptly describe Markayya’s predicament. He states:

“Any work done in good spirit is good work. It is not work that is tiring or degrading but the wrong attitude on brings to life” (Iyengar 211)

The Man-Eater of Malgudi has Vasu as its central character. A taxidermist by profession appears out of the blue at Nataraj’s press, ordering visiting cards intending to begin his career in Malgudi. He learnt the art of stuffing animals from a master named Suleiman, but before that, he learnt wrestling and killed the guru with a deadly chop in a moment struck Nataraj as a man of abnormal features. He had “a tanned face, large powerful eyes under thick eyebrows, a large forehead with a shock of unkempt hair like a black halo” (Man-Eater 13). After failing to appease a forestry official to get a licence to kill animals, Vasu began poaching in the Mempi forest, besides shooting innocent creatures such as cats, dogs and eagles. On being questioned about propriety in killing an eagle, held sacred by the Hindus because it is Lord Vishnu’s vehicle, Vasu replies flippantly as:



“I want to try and make Vishnu use his feet now and then” (P64)

Narayan applies the mythological story of Bhasmasura to Vasu to underline the distinction between good and evil:

“The strong man of evil continues to be reckless until he is destroyed by the tempo of his own misdeeds. Evil has in it, buried subtly, the infallible seeds of its own destruction, and however frightening a demon might seem, his doom is implied in his own propensities” (P8)

Malgudi is deeply traditional and caste-ridden. Here arranged marriage is common phenomenon and horoscopes are often compared. This happened in Narayan’s own life. Narayan married Rajam in spite of the fact that their horoscopes did not agree. The astrologer of the girl’s side had predicted that Narayan would prove a widower but he was defeated by Narayan’s own pundit who at the sight of rupees was all praise for Narayan’s horoscope. Narayan lost his wife after five years and this confirmed Narayan’s belief in horoscopes all the more. Chandran does not marry the girl he loves because the horoscopes do not rally. This problem crops up in **The Financial Expert** as well. The astrologer who thinks that the horoscopes of Balu and Brinda do not match, is dismissed with a fee of Rupee one whereas one who testifies that the horoscopes match perfectly, is rewarded with a fee of Rupees Seventy five. Most of his characters are innocent at large pitted against an unsympathetic environment. They are traditional and superstitious. They believe that everything on earth is preordained and that no amount of human efforts can ease the situation. The heroes of his novels do not control the events but events control them. They are helpless creatures torn by desires and tossed this way and that by the caprice of fortune. Chandran **The Bachelor of Arts** who is intensely in love with Malathi, cannot marry because the horoscopes do not agree. He leaves home and becomes a sanyasi. In **Mr. Sampath** Narayan sees the world as being controlled by blind and unpredictable forces. Mr. Sampath, the cunning rogue who dominates the story is also forced by the circumstances to leave Malgudi forever. **The English Teacher** after the death of his wife, finds solace in the world of spirits, and Raju, the guide in **The Guide**, dies a ruined man not because he wanted to die but circumstances so conspire that the only alternative before him is to become an unwilling martyr. Briefly, the heroes of Narayan depend upon chance or luck for their happiness or unhappiness. If things go contrary, they run away and sometimes even become sanyasi. Largely, they accept defeat and find happiness in submission to traditional force of the society. In the words of Dr. Badal,

“Narayan’s characters are typically Malgudians rooted in the age-old local traditions. His characters belong to Malgudi. His Sampaths and Chandrans do not play their part, but live more in and out, talk and laugh, and then disappear only to appear again in the familiar sights”
(13)

The Guide, Narayan’s magnum opus, is his mature book in which the theory of karma is enunciated in the life of Raju, the protagonist. According to Hinduism, it is a foregone conclusion that an individual lives and dies in accordance with his karma and vasanas. John updike observes:

“As a Hindu Narayan believes in reincarnation universe infinite rebirths... He surveys his teeming scene from the perspective of this most ancient of practiced religions”(P37)

The Painter of Signs is evidently a novel which underlines the problem, population explosion and the nagging problems arising out of it. The use of an ancient Hindu legend is appreciably obvious in the novel after **The Man – Eater of Malgudi**. In the later part of **The Painter of Signs**, Raman himself mentions “The Ancient King Santhanu, when Daisy spells out her condition for their marriage. The story of King Santhanu in **The Mahabharata** is about a handsome damsel who agrees to marry the king Santhanu on condition that he shall not question any of her activities when she becomes his wife and that she would crack their marriage the moment he breaks this condition. Santhanu marries her on these terms. But he is shocked when she successively drowns the seven children born to them from time to time, but he does not object in view of his vow to her at the time of their marriage. When the eight child is to be drowned in this manner, he is not able to restrain his stance and protests with his mystifying wife. Thus, he violates their condition and hence she leaves him. She reveals to Santhanu her identity as Ganga, the sacred river, who assumed a human form and became a mother so that the curse of the sage Vasistha on the eight vasus (the attendants of India) might run its period. The similarity between the legend of Santhanu and the love story of Raman and Daisy in **The Painter of Signs** is significant enough. Raman, the sign-board painter, like king Santhanu, is so much infatuated with love for his enchantress Daisy that he is ready to accept marriage with her on any condition:

“Daisy had laid down two conditions before accepting his proposal. One, that they should have no children, and two, if by mischance, one was born, she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work.



Raman was not to object or modify this any manner... If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even. When I am a wife on any day you question why or how, I will leave you”

Daisy is a modern and radical woman. Her past like that of Ganga is veiled in a mystery. She did not believe in ‘love’ and for her it is simply a romanticism created by the literary man. Ganga’s real identity is revealed to Santhanu only at the end when she broke away from him. When Raman’s proposal with Daisy, she is not able to digest it. She has been brought up in an orthodox family with its insular tradition. She does not want her nephew Raman to marry a person about whose caste or family background is quite unknown to them. Raman pleads with her that true love does not know the barrier of caste and conventions. As Raman wants to have his way, she decides to go on a pilgrimage to Badrinath, Amarnath and finally to Benaras and spend her remaining years in spiritual meditation, die and finally get dissolved in the Ganga. Here Narayan embodies the pure spirit of Hinduism by revealing Hindu customs and rituals. Raman’s aunt goes on pilgrimage with motive common to all religious minded old man and woman of Hindu religion. For every old person, the most auspicious end to their life at Benares and to be finally dissolved in the waters of the Ganga are desired spiritual bliss Narayan unfolds the religious ambition of every Hindu old man and woman.

Narayan’s introduction of the old hermit of the temple of the Goddess of plenty with his mystic powers of making the barren women bear child by letting them pray in the temple for three days, of taming the wild animals and even making the mountain bow to him by appealing to the universal soul and of his powers to look into the present, past and future of a person, is part of the religious myth of Narayan introducing Sadhus and Sanyasis in his novels.

Thus, Narayan renders into modern fiction various myths and legends drawn from the classical Indian traditional literature, epics and tales such as **The Mahabharata**, **The Bagavatgita**, **Jataka tales** and the Panchatantra, the world famous and internationally known collection of animal stories. Taken from these various traditional sources the myths and legends are improved and improvised to suit the modern times and contemporary situation. One cannot fail to appreciate ‘the rainbow magnificence of life’ in Narayan’s novels. It is the ‘miracle of faith’ forged by the use of myth that is enacted in these novels. Despite the use of myth, it is the ‘incredible universe’ charged with ‘moral imagination’ that comes to us in the above unforgettable novels of the ‘grand old man of Malgudi’.

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