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Deciphering the Mythical Strands in R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*

Preeti Patanjali

Abstract:

R. K. Narayan's novels are laced with multiple meanings and significations. He is widely acclaimed for his ingenious technique of bestowing multiple connotations through various mythical allusions; mythical allusions are an integral part of his novels. Although *The Painter of Signs* is a short and a brief novel but despite that it is one of the treasure houses of R. K. Narayan where one could find numerous mythical strands floating with an ease. These mythical strands though invoked humorously express a lot of implicit meanings. So, this article would attempt to decipher and scrutinize the mythical waves in this exuberant novel as well as the hidden implications regarding the characters.

Keywords: Myth, Allusion, Rationality, Ideological state apparatus, Non-material culture.

R. K. Narayan is one of those versatile writers whose novels speak more than their literal impressions. Each word is in harmony with the situations or incidents arose in the novels. His novels very explicitly portray the intended themes but along with that there are implicit ironic statements as well implying more than the apparent sense; they seem to be a sort of an appendage which the author has left for the readers to identify and demystify. This implicitness is quite visible in all his novels in the form of mythical allusions to scriptures and puranas.

So, it is necessary here to first understand the word myth. The word myth has Greek roots; it is a derivational of the Greek word 'mythos'. It refers to an anecdote irrespective of its authenticity:

> a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (Abrams & Harpham 178)

The above definition clearly states that myths are intrinsically related to the lives of human beings; myths have a strong hold on the habits and actions of people. They are very much present in their lives, either as actions or as habits. Consciously and unconsciously they are an invisible part of the lives of people. Correspondingly, the novels of R. K. Narayan extensively demonstrate the presence of myths in the lives of human beings. He alludes to various myths in his novels that are entangled with and explained the lives of the characters.

One such novel is *The Painter of Signs* where the characters and their actions and utterances call some significant myths which further respond to the internal and unconscious states and dilemmas of them.

R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* exemplifies his vast knowledge of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and puranas. They are not just mere references but they utter or imply a lot of things regarding the characters. The mythical allusions are the traits of the characters, in other words, the writer is trying to show the split personalities hidden in the characters of the novel.

The mythical allusions, in the novel, are mostly uttered by Raman and his aunt Laxmi. Laxmi codifies a traditional woman who is deeply fond of shastras and puranas as evident from her regularity in listening to Harikathas every evening; these Harikathas are an integral part of her daily life. Her constant allusions to the different phases of Harikathas are anticipative glimpses to the upcoming events in Raman's life. She could be a sort of a sutradhar as in a drama who comes and informs or provide hints to the audience of the next scene. Her first allusion corresponds to the upcoming love life of Raman, "Today, he is going to narrate Krishna's wedding with Rukmini, and I want to stay through" (39). In the beginning of the novel, Raman is seen as a very passionate man towards his job of sign board painter; it is not just a source of monetary assurance to him but more than that this work is an art to him which he worships ardently. Love and marriage seem a far off island to him. When he first met Daisy he was attracted towards her and this attraction got a firm footing only after his third meeting with her immediately after this mythical allusion. Through this allusion Narayan is hinting towards the strong waves of love in Raman's life and his firm decision to marry Daisy.

Another similar allusion comes towards the end when Laxmi was partially convinced of Raman's affair with Daisy, "when he was nearing the final rice and buttermilk stage of dinner, she just said, "Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battlefield was the discourse today, and it thrilled me. The pundit is so learned, you know"" (135). This allusion, too, is laden with hidden significations. Arjuna, at the time of war, was in a dilemma whether to fight against his relatives or not but Krishna's advice settled all his dilemmas. Unintentionally and obliquely, Laxmi admonishes Raman that, like Arjuna, he, too, is in a confused state and he is unable to differentiate between right and wrong.

Raman was bewitched by Daisy's personality; her simplicity, her firmness, her uniqueness was pulling him towards her. His attraction for Daisy is explicitly evident in the novel; majority of the novel is echoing his irresistible infatuation for Daisy. Narayan has skilfully paralleled his infatuation and irresistibleness with those of saints and sages of puranas:

> Our puranas were full of instances of saints failing in the presence of beauty. The gods grew jealous of austere men and manoeuvred to disturb their rigours, and their purpose; their agency was always a woman of beauty. Now the same situation was presenting itself in the garb of a Daisy. He had determined to give sex its place, and somehow the gods didn't seem to like it. Having written sign-

> boards for so many years, it was rather strange that he should be presented with a female customer now, and that it should prove so troublesome. (40)

It is quite a humorous juxtaposition where Narayan has juxtaposed Raman with the saints. The allusion satirizes the puranas where women were used as pawns to disturb the tapas of the saints and sages. The gods, though a symbol of power and authority, were powerless and helpless to intervene in the tapas of the saints and, so, they used women as a weapon of seduction to break their meditation. Here, Daisy is very much like the nymphs of the heaven who came and disturbed the meditative life of writing sign boards of Raman and enticed him with her charm and persona. Miraculously she entered his life and added a different flavour to his monotonous meditative life. Narayan substantiated the comparison by further calling her Mohini through the mouth of Raman:

> His tension suddenly relaxed. He felt it absurd to be holding this thing in his fist, and put it back. He called, "Daisy! Daisy!" He got out and ran hither and thither calling her. Began to feel worried. Or could it be she was Mohini, who tempted men and fooled them? He quietly went back to his own carpet under the cart. (94)

She is indeed Mohini who tempted him for some time and then suddenly vanishes from his life. Apsaras or nymphs were not allowed to marry anyone and whenever "Indra was in danger of losing his throne, or the other gods were in a similar plight through the austerity of the devout, some of the more attractive were commissioned to visit them and distract their minds" (Wilkins 182). Similarly, Daisy entered his life as an enchantress and deluded him. Moreover, Daisy could be seen as a modern apsara with the attributes of a new woman. Though she is very much similar to the apsaras of puranas who come with a purpose to distract but her aim separates her from the traditional apsaras; she defies the stereotypical role of a woman and establishes a new woman, progressive and independent:

> 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…Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman's life…I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well-defined purpose from which I will not swerve. I gave my word to the Reverend that I would not change my ideas. 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…There was a mad glint in her eyes when she spoke thus, but in the intoxication of her personality, Raman said, "Whatever you say, I will never interfere. I won't question you. I will be like the ancient king Santhanu… (159)

Furthermore, Daisy is well-prepared, in future, to play the role of Menaka and Ganga in Raman's life. She made it clear to him that if any child is born then she would give away the child as Menaka abandoned her daughter Sakuntala and would continue pursuing her purpose of population control as Menaka continued her work of seduction assigned to apsaras. Here, a sort of role reversal is seen. Daisy, unlike the typical woman, denied chasing any

obligation expected from a woman, contrastingly, she put forward her conditions of which only man or the groom has been licensed and Raman obediently agreed for her every condition like a docile girl. Firstly, she refused for any marriage rituals and agreed for Gandharva marriage as it does not have any social ritual and, secondly, refused to have children. It also highlights the mythical allusion of Santhanu and Ganga. Ganga, the river goddess, came to earth to bestow deliverance to the vagrant souls married Santhanu but for a definite purpose to liberate the eight Vasus from the curse of sage Vasisth. She told Santhanu that she would leave him on any day he would question her ways and actions. Similarly, Daisy has a definite purpose in mind and life to limit population. Chellappan opines:

> In *The Painter of Signs* we have a modern version of the Sandhanu story of the *Mahabharata*: here, Daisy of the Family Planning Centre like the Ganga, lays several conditions for the infatuated Raman, the painter of signs, to marry her and finally disappears. The parallel at the surface level is closer, but the difference shows the degeneration of life in the modern world (as in *The Waste Land*) but is itself purposeful, and it enhances the irony. (Chellappan 29)

Daisy is a dedicated and determined woman in pursuing her goal. She wants to bring an awakening among women; she wants to eradicate the ignorance that is the root cause of the suppression of women. Though, in the middle of the novel, Raman announces "his aim in life was to establish the Age of Reason" (77). But this aim is followed just by Daisy; she wants to establish logic and reason among men and women in particular and the country in general. She wants to eradicate all the myths concerning the birth of children that are dominating the lives of people, more specifically women, "Our shastras say that the more children in a home, the more blessed it becomes" (70). Daisy is the voice of Narayan who is refuting such mythical claims with a stick of humour and he made it clear by saying that mythical stories are fabricated only by the people in the final pages of the novel through the mouth of Daisy:

> You find a story for every occasion in the puranas. Have you none in which the god in the almirah comes out and twists the ears of the man?...Well, we might create a story on those lines. After all, someone like you and me will have produced all those stories. (170-71)

Narayan moves a step forward in his mythical allusions while expressing the weakness of men for women when he discursively compared Raman with Adam, "He often told himself, the more they try, the more firmly will they be repulsed. He had steeled himself against this blunder committed by human beings since Adam. If Adam had possessed a firm mind, the entire course of creation would have taken a different turn" (45). Through such allusions as the nymphs of puranas and Adam, Narayan is constantly pointing and criticizing the infirmity of men for the feminine beauty.

Raman is one of the interesting and humorous characters of Narayan. In his irresistibleness towards Daisy, he employs unsuccessful ways to stay away from her. He even wore deformed spectacles but all in vain. Though in those spectacles Daisy looked no less than a female demon even then he couldn't bury his infatuation for her:

He noticed that she seemed heavy-jowled and somewhat ridiculous, with her forehead slightly tapering…She seemed to grin, and looked like a demoness! Soorpanaka's approach should have had the same effect on Rama, he reflected, recollecting an episode from the Ramayana. Her teeth seemed to jut out and were uneven. (43)

A point to be noted is that whenever he is with Daisy his traditional self gets activated. Majority of the mythical allusions has been uttered by him. First he compared Daisy to the nymph Mohini, then with Soorpanaka and later on with Yama, "Thank God, she is only concerned with births and not death. Otherwise she'll be pestering Yama to take away more people each day, he reflected" (69). Raman has expressed her various attributes by referring her with different names; the name 'Mohini' highlights her charm and fascination, 'Ganga' adverts her determined self, 'Soorpanaka' connotes her adamant nature for a purpose while 'Yama' expresses her profession of limiting population. All in all, by calling her with such different names he has fused the various entities into her. Unknowingly, he admits that she is a complete woman yet his conscious self is not aware of his admission. On the other hand, his comparison of himself to Santhanu is in agreement considering his weak conviction and muddled mind.

Raman always wanted his aunt Laxmi to think and behave in a rational way but unconsciously he is, also, a man of traditions. He stayed with Daisy during the campaigning of controlling population but even after spending so much of time with her neither he could comprehend her, nor her view point. Raman is a plain character yet full of complexities. On the other hand, Daisy and Laxmi are comprehensible characters; from the beginning to the end they are confident in their views and moving accordingly on a straight path. Laxmi summarizes a traditional woman who strongly believes in the shastras and puranas, furthermore, she wanted Raman to marry a traditional girl and when she couldn't gulp his decision of marrying Daisy then finally she decided to leave him. Daisy, too, is deeply rooted to her convictions in rationality. But Raman, though a man of rational intellect, is somewhere between Daisy and Laxmi. When he is with Laxmi, he reveals his logical self while with Daisy his traditional self is exhibited.

Along with the classical myths, local myths, too, are persuasive in the novel. The people of Mempi Hills, in the novel, are surrounded and clenched by the local myth of the Goddess of Plenty. The old priest or the originator of this local myth exercises control over people through this myth as a weapon:

I built this temple and installed the Goddess of Plenty, long before anyone came here and built these houses. The Goddess came to me in a dream and commanded and I made it my mission in life. For a hundred miles around there is no temple like this. Barren women come and pray here for three days, and conceive within thirty days. (70)

People of Mempi Hills believed that he is a supreme being and has supernatural powers. The residents of this area are completely under his control and they defy any logic that try to

refute their faith. They showed hostility to Daisy when she tried to teach them. Even Raman was persuaded by his talks considering Daisy. And when the priest saw his effect on Raman he substantiated that with his further theory:

> Did you notice the single flower that fell down from the crown? That's an omen—which means success, but trouble before and after. Did you see that that flower rolled down to her arm first and then the feet and then on to the floor? If it had rested on her arm or lap, it'd have meant a good answer for your prayer. (77)

Myths, local as well as classical, pervade the book. They are invoked not just in the literal sense but also in the metaphorical contexts. Narayan, through his technique of invoking myths, is highlighting the Indian culture. In India, the classical texts, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and puranas, play a very substantial role in imparting moral education to children. These classical texts are brimmed with mythical tales and legends which parents teach to their children. These mythical stories are a sort of ideologies which parents implant in their children. These mythical stories are a part of ideological state apparatus propounded by Louis Althusser. Althusser opines that a state works in two ways—through repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatus (Althusser 96). Ideological state apparatus functions through ideology; these mythical stories with time grow as ideologies and become an integral part of a person's existence. They are sort of non-material culture; non-material culture is "the ideological system created by the members of a culture to explain the world and their existence in it—religion, social, economic, and political philosophies, and the institutionalized practices they support..." (Velo 126). The same happens with Raman; the mythical stories are an integral part of Raman's life; he lived among this non-material culture. And that's why he connects the incidents in his life with the mythical tales and persons. Narayan, too, is pointing out that though Raman screams logic and rationality but his unconscious self is still in the clutch of myths and traditions. Through the character of Raman, Narayan is intending to show that like Raman mostly people are suffering with the same unconscious disease of partial and superficial awakening.

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