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The Delirium of Love in R. K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*

Dr. Vinod Gupta

Lecturer (English)

Government Women's Polytechnic College

Rajiv Gandhi Technical University

Bhopal (M.P.) 462001

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Abstract:

The architectonic quality is rarely found among the works of the literary artists. It is an organizing quality that integrates the design of a work of art. It harmoniously blends almost all the elements of a work. A work of art is blessed with the architectonic quality when almost all its constituents and all its characteristic elements run into, and feed, one another for healthy development. We find this architectonic quality abundantly in the novels of R.K.Narayan. All the constituents and the characteristic elements of his novels like plot, character, theme, dialogue, narration, description, Malgudi, society, and fate run into, and feed, one another, to be resolved harmoniously towards the desired effect. Let us seek this quality in one of his novels.

Keywords: architectonic, quality, theme, delirium, love, illusion, story, plot, character, dialogue, description, fate, society, religion, Malgudi, humour, pathos, nostalgia.

R.K. Narayan's novel *The Bachelor of Arts* overwhelms us by its theme. The theme of the novel is delirium of love with its aftermath of illusion and change. All the elements of the novel, story, plot, character, dialogue, description, fate, society, religion, Malgudi, humour, pathos, nostalgia and the like contribute to, and concentrate on, this theme, and are clothed in a language suitable to them.

Chandran, like the heroes of Shakespearean comedy, falls deeply in love with Lakshmi-Malathi at first sight when he sees her at the Sarayu sands. He is almost enamoured of her, "It was on one of his river ramblings that he met Malathi and thought that he would not have room for anything else in his mind. No one can explain the attraction between two human beings. It happens." (Narayan, BA 54). Chandran had seen many other girls. But this girl seems to him to be a distinct one, the queen of his heart. The one we like most seems to be lovely in whatever one does. Here Chandran likes her for whatever she does. This is the mystery of love. He is so much enamoured of her that he would like to see her doing all this for his whole life. But the Indian ethos, especially the Malgudi one, comes in as hindrance.

Psychologically the first flush of fresh love is shy. Now this psychology comes in as hindrance, "He passed on. He went forward a few paces and wanted to turn back and take another look at the girl. But that could not be done. He felt that the scores of persons squatting on the sand were all watching him." (BA 55). There is now no escape for Chandran from the thought of the girl. He thinks about her age and caste. He feels uneasy when he fears

that she may be married. Narayan unobtrusively condemns the early marriage of girls, especially in the Malgudi town:

How old was she? Probably fourteen. Might be even fifteen or sixteen. If she was more than fourteen she must be married. There was a touch of despair in this thought. What was the use of thinking of a married girl? ...Probably she was not married. Her parents were very likely, rational and modern, people who abhorred the custom of rushing a young child into marriage. (BA 55)

To whisper the name of one's beloved in half-wakefulness, to laugh at oneself and to get up with a haggard face, are the symptoms of the delirium of love from which Chandran is at present suffering. Delirium continues. At long last, fortune smiles on him. He meets the girl again by chance on the river sand. He is drawn as if by a rope towards her. He wants to make the most of the opportunity. He wants to look at her at close quarters. But psychology of love works. He does not dare go near her because he fears the stare of people, even though no one cares for what he does. His courage fails.

It is the psychology of pure love that it is shy at first. The lover is so conscious that he or she regards even the most indifferent look as fixed on him or her. A true lover, suffering from the delirium of love, acts like the intelligence officer of police, and gathers a lot of information about the beloved. Chandran does not lag behind in this respect. (BA 64)

There is no other novel of Narayan in which society, religion, fate and horoscopes play a more cumulative role in deciding the love story. The marriage of Chandran depends on fortune, on the matching of his horoscope with that of Malathi. Her horoscope will be sent to Chandran only if everything is auspicious. Moreover, it is not enough that the horoscopes match. The matching of horoscopes should be in accordance with the kind of almanac in which some parents believe. According to D.W.Krishna Iyer who is the rigid believer in horoscopes, the horoscopes of the boy and the girl do not match in accordance with the *Vakya* almanac.

The heart of Chandran is broken. He leaves home in disappointment. Disillusioned, he becomes a *sanyasi*. He is not the transformed *sanyasi* like Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. He becomes *sanyasi* as a protest against society, which robbed him of his love, a protest against her beloved Malathi herself who did not fight for love and did not in any way return his love.

The novel is a tragedy of love. There are several factors responsible for this tragedy. It is just a matter of chance that the horoscopes do not match. That is why it is commonly said that marriages are settled in heaven and celebrated on earth. But this is not the whole thing. There is something mysterious about the inscrutable ways of Heaven. Had Chandran not seen Malathi on the Sarayu sands, had Malathi responded to Chandran's love, had Malathi's father not been a rigid believer of horoscopes, had he believed not in the *Vakya* almanac but in the *Drig* almanac, tragedy would not have befallen. Mars might have killed Malathi or not but fate, society and the stubborn rigidity of D.W.Krishna have certainly killed Chandran alive.

Even in spite of all these obstacles tragedy could have been averted. According to the revised examination of the *Vakya* almanac and the horoscopes Malathi would not have been killed by Mars if she would have married Chandran when he had crossed the age of twenty-five and four months. Chandran was almost twenty-three years and it was a matter for the two families to wait for two years and four months for celebrating the marriage. True, the girl, according to the strict customs of the Malgudi society, would have perhaps crossed the marriageable age but there would have been, truly speaking, no problem if the boy's family would have accepted her and agreed for marriage after two years and four months. The marriage could have been settled then and celebrated later. But that was not done for Chandran who was obsessed with Malathi's love. No one cared for the intense feelings of the poor helpless Chandran. Chandran had almost implored to his father in vain:

When she (mother of Chandran) was gone, Chandran suggested to his father: 'Let us grant that Mars lasts till my twenty-fifth year. I am nearly twenty-three now. I shall be twenty-five very soon. Why don't you tell them that I will wait till my twenty-fifth year; let them also wait for two years. Let us come to an understanding with them.' (BA 90).

It is as if a thirsty person is imploring for water. But no one gives him even a drop. One cannot understand why Chandran's father thinks "it would be perfectly useless to reason things with Chandran." (BA 90). One cannot understand why he does not meet Krishna Iyer when he knows that the happiness of his son depends on this marriage. He pretends that he will meet Krishna but has no intention of meeting him. Chandran asks his father privately everyday if he met Krishna Iyer. The father gives him the stock reply that Krishna Iyer could not be found either at home or in the office. Disappointed, Chandran writes a letter to Malathi as a desperate last effort. His simple letter contains an account of his love for her. He asks her if she can wait for him for two years and four months. He requests her to write a single word 'Yes' or 'No'. He gives this letter to his friend Mohan and requests him to deliver it to Malathi. He emphasizes the fact that it is his last chance. But, like his father, Mohan also disappoints him. On being asked if he had delivered the letter to Malathi, Mohan replies, "I couldn't get a chance, and I destroyed it this morning when I learnt that she is to be married." (BA 92). The heart of Chandran is completely broken. He now decides to leave Malgudi. His mother lacks sensibility. She does not understand that her son is suffering from the harrowing agony. When she goes to the railway station to see him off, she tells him that he must return to Malgudi "very plump and fat". (BA 92). Both his parents have disappointed him, especially the mother who cannot feel the woe of his son. Chandran goes to Madras, spends some time with Kailas but soon leaves for some other place. He cannot forget Malathi even after becoming a *sanyasi*, "There were still sights and sounds and hours which breathed, through some association or other, memories of Malathi." (BA 124). His becoming *sanyasi* is not his transformation to spirituality. It is only a protest against Heaven's unjust punishment, his parent's indifference, Krishna Iyer's rigidity and Malathi's coldness towards his deep love. He loses his love. Malathi is married to some other person. All is dark to Chandran, utterly dark, as it was to Samson in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. It is like the darkness in the heart of Savitri who loses her husband in *The Dark Room*. The dream world of Chandran's love is shattered. He loses all the zest and relish for life. He becomes a *sanyasi*. But disillusioned, he returns home.

There is a proposal of marriage. The girl is Susila— coy, intelligent and beautiful, studying in sixth form. Mohan persuades Chandran to marry. He argues that if one does not love anyone, then it matters little whether he marries or does not marry, and that it is always worthwhile to marry, if not for love, then certainly for money and companionship. There is then the travesty of the Platonic love, of the Shakespearean view of love that “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.” Callous realism replaces divine love. Love is reduced to mockery when marriage is decided by toss. Mohan tosses the silver coin and shouts that Chandran must keep his word. It is Heads for marriage. Later Chandran’s mother tells him, “It is all a matter of fate... ‘You can marry only the person whom you are destined to marry and at the appointed time.’ ” (BA 92)

Chandran is married to Susila. The delirium of divine Platonic love is lost for ever. The mundane love starts with the exchange of letters, “My Own Darling, fifteen thousand kisses, and twenty thousand kisses”. Chandran leaves for Talapur to see Susila suffering from slight cold. The bright days have come. But the mad days of the divine mad love, with all its heights and depths, are gone for ever, never to return again.

But, above all, Chandran himself thwarts his own love. Like the Shakespearian tragic heroes, he is the author of his own woe. He himself is responsible for the failure of his love. *The Bachelor of Arts*, as a love story, is unique in world fiction. It is a love story in which the hero does not even converse with the heroine. His love for Malathi, in this respect, is somewhat like that of Petrarch for Laura and that of Dante for Beatrice, “Petrarch didn’t see half as much of Laura nor Dante of Beatrice.” (Shaw, *Man And Superman* 53)

Chandran had simply seen Malathi several times at the Sarayu bank, had peeped through the doors of her house at the Mill Street, and had begun to believe that she had fallen in love with him. He is prey to his own delusion. It is this that is at the heart of the tragedy.

Undoubtedly these feelings are intense, but they are misplaced. If Pip in *Great Expectations* and Tess in *Tess* had uttered these feelings for Estella and Angel respectively, they would have been genuine. But here they are fake, misplaced. Chandran is again uttering all these things as if Malathi had been in deep love with him and had deceived him. His “anger with Malathi” merely expresses his utter illusion. He complains that she had plenty of opportunities to show that she had noticed him. There can be nothing more absurd and silly a thing than this complaint. Does he mean to say that she had fallen in love with him only because she had noticed him. She might have noticed many other boys and according to the same logic of Chandran she should have fallen in love with all these boys. This railing at woman and love, then, is meaningless and carries no weight. All this evidences Chandran’s utter illusion. The only sensible and true thing, which he utters, is “a silly infatuation”. Yes it is the one-sided silly infatuation because most probably the girl does not even know anything about Chandran’s love for her. Chandran himself utters the words, “a prey to illusion” (BA 120) while climbing the staircase leading to Mohan’s room at Mill Street after his return to Malgudi.

There are three things, which contribute to Chandran's tragedy, his failure in love. We have examined the first one, Chandran's illusion. On reading the novel minutely the impression formed is that Malathi does not love Chandran. Far from loving him, she even does not know him or his feelings for her. How can she? She might have seen him. But mere seeing is not falling in love. The tragedy of Chandran is that he expects Malathi to return his love, which is only an illusion. Chandran has never talked to her, not even once, has never expressed his feelings to her. His illusion causes his tragedy. The second thing is that he is almost a coward. He has no courage to talk to her. It may be granted that a boy is a bit shy in his first, fresh flush of love. But after all, if he wants love to take shape, he will have to take the initiative and declare his love to the girl whom he loves. But Chandran does not even dare look at her because "the scores of persons squatting on the sand are watching her" (BA 55) because he is obsessed with the feeling that he is being observed by the whole crowd on the river bank. He thinks of occupying a place that will be close to her and in the direction of her vision. But he does not dare even doing this. He himself admits that he is a coward when he cannot summon courage to talk to his father about his marriage with Malathi. Had he had some courage and talked to Malathi, things would have been different. The third thing responsible for his tragedy is his inactivity. Hamlet might have delayed action but ultimately he did act. But Chandran never acts. It is really he who is a brooding philosopher.

It is Chandran's delirium of love for Malathi that the novel savours. We have it when Chandran is in Malgudi, when he becomes a *sanyasi* and even when he returns home. It is there positively and even negatively. When, as *sanyasi*, he feels indignant and rails at womankind it is his delirium of love for Malathi negatively spoken. It is there positively when he returns home. There is a heartbeat when he sees her house in front of the hotel room of Mohan:

As he approached Mohan's hotel he could not help recollecting with a grim detachment the state of mind he was in the last time he was here. The detachment was forced, his heartbeat fast as he came in front of the Modern Indian Lodge. Suppose she was standing at that very moment at the entrance of the opposite house? Before slipping into the hotel, in spite of his resolve, he turned his head once; but there was no one at the entrance. As he climbed the staircase he reproached himself severely for this. Still a prey to illusions! Was he making for another bout of asceticism and wandering? (BA 120)

What is all this if not the delirium of love at its highest degree?

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