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Mythology in R.K. Narayan's Novels

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Abstract:

R.K.Narayan was a leading author of early Indian literature in English . He was an Indian writer known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. Narayan highlights the social context and everyday life of his characters. Narayan's writing technique was unpretentious with a natural element of humour about it. It focused on ordinary people, reminding the reader of next-door neighbours, cousins and the like, thereby providing a greater ability to relate to the topic.

Keywords: Mythology, Indian literature,English,Fiction etc

Mythology:

Narayan's method, although lighter in touch, more comical and tentative, has similarities to a technique, sometimes found in Roman Catholic novelists, of seeing possibilities of the divine in unexpected places and personages. This sense of incongruity contributes towards a tolerance of sometimes disagreeable social behavior.

Narayan is of the Brahmin caste, the same priestly caste to which V. S. Naipaul belongs. The family came from the province, of Madras to Mysore. His father attended Madras University before becoming headmaster of the government school in Mysore. Narayan himself rebelled against the Christian teachers at the Christian Missionary School in Madras.

After graduating from Mysore University, he found teaching unsuitable and decided against such usual Indian middle-class careers as the civil service and journalism. Instead he wished to become a writer, a profession which then did not exist in India as there was no local or foreign market for Indian novels. Although a vegetarian and follower of Indian spiritual practices, Narayan chose his own wife rather than follow the traditional custom of having an arranged marriage. When an astrologer warned his intended wife's family against the marriage, Narayan paid a second astrologer to cast a more favorable horoscope.

For if there is one characteristic which Narayan's characters almost without exception share, it is mediocrity. Eccentrically colorful as it may strike one on first introduction, Malgudi is a city of the petty and the unfulfilled . . .

The sickness from which all the citizens of Malgudi suffer, and which their mediocrity reflects, is the mid-twentieth-century alienation of the Indian middle class. Their traditional codes and hierarchies have become fragmented and private, so that no man can any longer fulfil himself in a traditional way except by holy withdrawal; yet the material success on the western model to which the Malgudians aspire belongs to an alien world which they rarely understand, so that here too their lives are diminished and unfulfilled.

Narayan's novels usually treat of those stranded between tradition and contemporary life. He does not write of peasants or urban workers; rather he shows the townsman who still thinks in older ways but who inhabits the modern world. George Woodcock has perceptively said.

Whereas other writers might use such a social situation forthemes of cultural or political conflict, Narayan sees Indian life as 'farcical' and perhaps more govern by fate and the tricks of destiny than will or character. It is the quiet ambiguity and inconclusiveness of his stories that make them seem innocent, impish and elusive. His art is similar to his vision of Indian life; he uses a natural Indian English, without the deliberateness of style found in Rao and Anand. He aims more at portraying the strange comic ways of the world than at any thematic or cultural significance.

Narayan brilliantly portrays a representative Indian who lives from moment to moment without thought of the future and without the ability to analyze and therefore understand his own behavior or destiny. .But if the portrait is comic rather than satiric, it is not solely because Narayan is amused by, rather than disapproving towards, such characters. Raju is treated sympathetically after his imprisonment; his fast, although partly a matter of vanity, is more the fault of the village and his own agreeableness than cunning. Raju confesses his past history to a village leader who treats it indifferently, perhaps seeing humility as part of holiness. And then, of course, there is the disturbingly ambiguous, somewhat sad conclusion when Raju may indeed have died to save the villagers from the drought. If Narayan is a skeptical, sophisticated insider laughing at the foibles of Indian self-deception, he also allows for the possibility that such apparently purposeless lives may be divinely influenced. In doing so he salvages what might be treated as a harsh criticism of Indian culture by implying that for all we know the irrationality may indeed have spiritual authenticity. The comedy may be a divine comedy. Perhaps Rosie is even a reincarnation of the serpent goddess?

Immorality, or religious obedience and disobedience. Vasu imposes himself on Natraj, takes over part of his printing shop without paying rent, uses the upper floor of the house to skin, preserve and stuff animals, takes out a legal injunction to prevent Natraj from ejecting him, fills the place with prostitutes, takes to stealing money from a public fund Natraj is heading, and plans to kill a temple elephant that is being used in a

village ceremony. Humiliated, continually bothered, threatened, on the verge of collapse, Natraj cannot take any action against Vasu, and recalls Gandhi's preaching

of nonviolence. At the book's conclusion the situation is resolved when Vasu in a fit of temper accidentally kills himself. Nonviolence wins over violence, passivity and obedience defeat activity and self-assertion.

The complexities of Narayan's fiction result from the neutral tone, the use of narrators who are themselves participants, and the ambiguous relationship of traditional myths and values to the events of the novels. In *The Printer of Malgudi* published originally under the title Mr. *Sampath,* myth is recalled by being used as the plot for a film while the actual events that take place both in the film and in the novel are contrary to the myth. Myth is thus set against its inversion or parody. Throughout the novel we are aware both of the difference between present-day India and its mystic past and of how the two continue alongside each other, rather intertwined than in a state of tension.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi often parodies Indian customs. There is the poet who writes an epic life of God Krishna in monosyllabic verse with such classic lines as 'Girls with girls did dance in trance'. Most of the activity in the village seems close to farce. While characters discuss large national issues, nothing is done. Such simple commercial activities as printing three-colored labels for bottles of soda water, a speech or some cards are always delayed and left unfinished. Against the foreground of such a comic India, there are reminders of another India:

The India of non-violence is, within the novel, also the India of non-achievement, in contrast to the American, scientific, getrich-quick attitudes of Vasu. If it is an India of inefficiency, it is also an India of manners, customs, ceremonies and tradition.While Vasu represents progress and westernization, he also is associated with a demon of Hindu mythology. He fits all the definitions of a *rakshasa:* persisted Shastri, and he went on to define the makeup of a *rakshasa,* or a demoniac creature who possessed enormous strength,strange powers, and genius, but recognized no sort of restraints of man or God. He said, 'Every *rakshasa* gets swollen with his ego. He thinks he is invincible, beyond every law. But sooner or later something or other will destroy him.

During a discussion of Hindu mythology there is a foreshadowing of Vasu's fate:Then there was Bhasmasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched, while nothing could ever destroy him. He made humanity suffer. God Vishnu incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, named Mohini; the *asura* became infatuated with her and she promised to yield to him only if he imitated all the gestures and movements of her own dancing. So a dance began: the demon was an accomplished one; at one point of the dance Mohini placed her palms on her own head, and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second, his blighting touch becoming active on his own head. Every man can think that he is great and will live forever, but no one can guess from which quarter his doom will come.

Because, said Sastri puckishly, 'he had to conserve all that might for his own destruction. Every demon appears in the world with a special boon of indestructibility. Yet the universe has survived all the *rakshasas* that were ever born. Every demon carries within him, unknown to himself, a tiny seed of self-destruction, and goes up in thin air at a most unexpected moment. Otherwise what is to happen to humanity?' He narrated again for my benefit the story of Bhasmasura, the unconquerable, who scorched everything he touched and finally reduced himself to ashes by placing his fingers on his own head.

Narayan's calmness, humour and acceptance seem an alternative to, almost a comment upon, the commitments and cultural themes in other pre-independence writers. V. S. Naipaul is possibly correct in seeing in Narayan's humour a passivity or tolerance that will become increasingly difficult as India modernises. Narayan's charming *The Painter of Signs* (1977) tells of the failed love of a rather spoiled provincial Brahmin intellectual for a westernised, casteless, modern Indian woman who preaches birth control and who breaks all the pieties to which he still adheres despite his claim to be a rationalist. The story is a retelling in modern guise of an old legend concerning King Santhanu and his goddess wife. Raman, the sign painter, in accepting whatever Daisy wants, performs in modern India the same unhappy role as Santhanuwith his goddess, but whereas the goddess kills her own children, Daisy in her modern incarnation, preaches population control. Since Raman is sceptical of Indian traditions, except as they offer him creature comforts, his failed marriage is doubly ironic.

Narayan usually writes about the semi-westernized middle class, those who hold modern ideas and practice modern styles of living but who in times of stress are emotionally tied to traditional culture. His provincial heroes often find themselves in conflict with a representative of extreme westernization or a representative of traditional values, or, more ironically, someone who although appearing modern is an incarnation of a Hindu devil or goddess. By treating the presence of myth, spiritualism and traditional values in the modern world, Narayan has given Indian culture a modern validity without resorting to polemics and assertion. As his stories are often narrated by the main characters, he has portrayed representative Indians living in the transition between old and new. His loosely constructed, quietly ironic stories, with their unasserted presence of traditional Hindu values and myths, are in their own way as much a reflection of a concern with national culture as the fiction of Frank Sargeson or Chinua Achebe. Whereas the main Indian poets of the first half of this century wrote mystic visions of the past, Narayan has implied that spiritual realities may exist, although in rather unexpected and humorous forms, in modern life.

Narayan's quiet affirmation of an eternal India might be contrasted with the focus on individual crisis found in the younger generation of writers. Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971) offers a complex sense of alienation, human separateness and crisis of identity in the portrait of Sarah Sean, an English woman married to an

Indian. Sarah feels withdrawn from both English and Indian life; she feels her life consists of frauds, charades and roles, that she is really nobody. Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) is another instance of recent Indian fiction about the alienation, confusion and violence felt by some middle-class Indian women towards the roles they have been taught to play in life and the effects of Americanisation on their image of themselves.

Whereas pre-independence Indian poetry tried to accommodate English to sonorous philosophical verse discourses and epics expressive of Indian spirituality, the new poetry, with its insistence on individuality, preciseness and firm technique, created a means of expressing the modern mind. PritishNandy's selected poems in Riding*the Midnight River* (1975) are striking in having created a vision which is both highly personal, an expression of the modern psyche, and consciously of post-independence India. The poems, while sometimes tender, have a violence which reflects the external world, a world of poverty, massacres, wars and persecution. Often Nandy's narrator appears as prisoner, criminal, victim, or suffers from feelings of being hunted. But he too is also a hunter. Since Nandy's language is unemotional, unmetaphorical, he creates a range of metaphoric significance by using contrast, disjointed syntax, oblique references and obscurity. Structural unity is achieved by repetition of phrases and images within the short lyric poems and within the book as a whole. The dislocation of narrative and language creates a focus on the self as the central consciousness within a threatening, alien world. Memories, both personal and of India, haunt his verse, with each poem being not so much a reconciliation as a confrontation. The rhythms, the rhymes, the use of English, the images are of our time. The more profoundly Nandy explores violence within himself and shapes it into well-crafted stanzas, the more his poems convey the tensions of urban life.

Kamala Das's confessional verse is another development of interest. Although the poetry is sometimes rhythmically slack and monotonous, the realistic notation of the immediacies of her private life, the openness about personal matters and the prosaic tonality represent a further stage in the movement of Indian literature away from protest, nationalism, myth and spiritualism towards recording direct involvement of individuals with the modern world.

Conclusion:

R.K. Narayan is a natural story teller unbothered by problems of political reform, cultural conflict or questions of national and self-identity. The novels deal with the comedy that results from people acting in situations of social and cultural change. Thus Narayan's novels treat of those living between tradition and contemporary life.

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