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## R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*: A Subtle Craft of Fiction

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**Abstract:** RK Narayan through his novels features a simple, elegant writing style incorporating economy, humor and irony in order to bring everyday life into prominence through Malgudi. This paper is an attempt to study RK Narayan's 'The Painter of Signs' where a third person perspective is employed. His style of narration blends compassion, myth, satire, tradition and modernity including the layers of distortion and comedy withing creative process. Through this Narayan envisioned the 'Niskama' conduct of the Bhagavad Gita. His characters are integrated with the pattern of myth and reality. The Novelist has perfectly transformed Malgudi into a symbol of contemporary life and tradition.

**Keywords:** Myth, creative tradition, spiritual vision, creative process.

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Characteristically speaking of Narayan's art of fiction in terms of aesthetic interests of any importance do not range beyond random reflections of his "comic mode". In 'Painter of Signs' the mythic element of Indian sensibility is in creative grapple with reality; here, Narayan's consciousness is mythical. This mythic consciousness entails, and so presents, a critical concept of creative process which is specific. Narayan's creative process means the same as the process of mythic consciousness. Narayan's first and the latest novel-*Swami and Friends* and *The Painter of Signs* point to one and the same bent of mind which is profoundly, and also potently spiritual. It is this that Prof. C.D. Narasimha calls "holistic". This bent also negotiates a form of peaceableness with the usual run, the "thusness" of life as a wise attitude of detachment or disengagement from it (life).

A close scrutiny of Narayan's novels reveals that they (Novels) set up interactions of the temporal and the timeless. The mythical allusions or evocations reach back not to the linear time of history but to the timelessness of myth to the archaic models of the "temple and the river Sarvu. This is done precisely to integrate into the present moment and to lift the moment out of the linear flow of historical time to timelessness.

However, this mode of separating and integrating of mythic consciousness, in one word, transformations assessed in this paper entitled "The Painter of Signs: Subtle Craft of Fiction". Malgudi always seems to be moving inward to open conceptual spaces In Narayan's Imagination. The spiritual in Narayan is a convenient emblem of this process.

It is a truism to say that literature is a "communication" of "Imaginative experience". "And it is equally true to say that in this act of communication, the species or the object of experience get transmitted. This manipulation is analogous to mythic function. It is a fact that in literary



works myth or a body myth operates "to strengthen," "to simplify", and "to clarify," in a single word, to interpret the facts or experiences of life, as the myth of Holy Grail does to the contemporary human condition of spiritual collapse in *The Waste Land*.

Narayan manipulates his data of Malgudi into an order which myth alone promotes or comprehends. In 'The Painter of Signs' even the sense of manipulation, or its strain goes, the mythic poise conducts itself in almost as natural rhythm as that of life. Here Narayan does what Chekhov does. Here Narayan is a complete realist in his ability, like that of Chekhov, in showing both the nagging facts of everyday existence and the feeling tone which they evoke on the part of those embroiled in them. In "The Painter of Signs" the representation as realistic and mythic at the same time. And this simultaneously is achieved by subtle craft of characterization which makes this integration possible,

Like Doestovesky, Narayan of "The Painter of Signs" is also a realist in the higher sense of the word. This reality, parading the street lanes, Government offices and so on, of Malgudi, forms pattern and forges that higher sense. "The Painter of Signs" places the focus on the social problem of the family planning: it employs harsh data, so that it sounds like an instructive, rather knowledgeable. In the dialogue between Daisy and the village teacher, document on family planning. But Daisy did not seem to need rest... She said, "Our work must start right away, before the monsoon begins, as it has been observed that the birth-rate goes up during the monsoon months" (P.57). The implications were clear that during the rains village folk, cooped up in their homes, had no better business than to procreate.... The teacher said, "when it rains, the main hall of the temple is filled with people. A pundit comes in that season and reads the Ramayan for forty days... the Mahabharata takes longer.....

...I agree that some control of population is necessary, but I feel its evil is exaggerated...

"Seven hundred-odd", said the teacher promptly. Daisy said, "It was just Six hundred last year. Has your food production increased twenty percent? Have your accommodations increased twenty percent? Still so many undeveloped areas... How many of the seven hundred-odd in this village will be prepared to move over to new areas when their homes become too congested?" (p.57-58).

Phrases and words like "the birth-rate," "monsoon," "grains," "control of population," "Seven hundred Odd," "Six hundred Last Year," "Food Production," "accommodation." "Children," "Undeveloped areas." "Congested homes" etc. define very much a recognizable content of Malgudi. They form a pattern. However, this pattern is suppressed by a different pattern suggested by the phrases, like "Temple" filled with people/" "Pundit," "The Ramayan," "The Mahabharat" etc.

It is to be noted that these patterns are simultaneous as they occur within the narrative tract. This gives to the transitional phases of Malgudi, a continuity; it relates the present to the past and vice-versa, by emphasising the changeless within a frame-work of changes. It is this relationship that impregnates the pattern of reality with a higher sense which is, of course, spiritual in nature and function.



In the analysis of the above extract we can see how the patterns are strongly matched in their range of references. Even when the reality pattern is denser in its details, the strength of the mythic pattern exhibits, and exercises itself in its inclusive symbolic functions. For example, the reference to "temple" governs the proceeding of the naturalistic strategies of realism by breathing into them an atmosphere of a potential spiritual order by evoking the traditional. As a contrast to this, we find that, even when reality does not form a pattern, it makes a single presence by way of reference to "the cost," of "Seven hundred and fifty rupees"-it makes the same impact on the frame-work of a spiritual vision as greater realistic details do.

However, it is pertinent to look into the following extract:

They have made all the arrangements-it'll cost-seven hundred and fifty rupees!" From this very sordid calculation, she continued, lost in visions of her pilgrimage.

"A darshanam of the God in Badrinath, and if possible to Amarnath, where the lingam is shaped in ice. I wouldn't care what happened to me or to the world after I have seen the holy places and dipped into the Ganges from its birthplace all along its course, until I end my pilgrimage in Benares. After this I shall want nothing more in life" (p.190).

In the above extract, the last line offers a contrast to the materiality of the first line "visions of pilgrimage" are manifestly spiritual in their meaning and implications. "Darshanam", "God," "Bardinath," "Amarnath" "holypplaces," "dipped into the Ganges," "Benares" and soon are the verbal architects of this vision. It is to be noted that the patterns of contrast dig deep into each other and emphasise continuity which, in the present context, is from the "gross calculation" to the "want nothing more in life."

In the first extract the reality pattern is heavily accented and in the second, the spiritual pattern; but in both the assimilative process is genuine and authentic. The transition from one world to another is not only smooth, but also natural. This merger is intended in so far as it suggests a third order which is mythic.

Raman suggests in himself a coherence of two patterns-distinctive and symbolic. The realistic i.e. distinctive pattern is manifestly offered in Raman's participation in the humdrum life of Malgudi. And the symbolic allusive pattern is intimated by classical implications of the proper noun. These two strains in Raman's person enforce each other to render him into an authentic vision of disengagement or detachment in life.

Raman's attitude is reflected in the following passage:

"Aunt's preparations to leave were elaborate. Although her possessions could be packed into a small jute handbag, her instructions were never ending. Raman became very considerate and spent as much time as he could with her. He felt he owed her at least his company. Raman 's aunt had left three days ago. For Raman the house seemed to have become vast and full of echoes. He diverted himself by peering into every part of it and planned alterations for Daisy's coming" (p.164).

In the beginning Raman does not feel happy with his aunt's proposal; infact, he feels "irritated, then he becomes "considerate"--he feels a pang of conscience; and then he feels a surge of memories after the aunt's departure, and finally, he overcomes the feeling of loneliness at aunt's



absence ("vast and full of echoes") by diverting himself to planning alterations. The expression "planned alterations" is significant as it suggests adjusted transitions. However, there is an underlying instinctive ease in transitions. As a matter of fact, he does not involve his inner self in the go of life. And this is the characteristic mode of Raman's life. All these impart to Raman a mythic detachment.

Raman is presented to us as an initially evolved average. Right from the beginning of the novel he seems to bear on his steeves an innate capacity to disengage himself from the tangles of existential situations. From the very beginning we find in Raman an in-built reservoir of strength of aloofness, of impersonality. In relations to his affair with Daisy, we find, there are larger moments of recoil, or withdrawal, or shyness-a kind of inner contrition-than the moments of encounter. In the following extracts we find how this moment of encounter emerges (extract A), and explodes (extract B), and then settles on a level-headed neutral, position (extract C):

(A) She glared at him for a second, hissing, "Taking advantage! You will learn your lesson like others who have learnt their lessons. I'll see that you go to jail for this. I'll tell the police first thing" (The Painter of Signs, p.112).

While it pleased him to notice her positive spirit reviving, at the same time he was filled with dread... The whole town would laugh at him and he'd be unfit to be seen again on his cycle on the Market Road. Jairaj would make capital out of it and corner all the signboards. "You know what that chap did, he tried to molest a customer, when she was stranded on the way, and this chap took advantage"(p.118).

There was so much evil packed in that single word "advantage" uttered now by Daisy.

He said, "please forget everything. I am sorry, perhaps I tried to joke and carried it too far".

(b) He was overcome with tenderness. He stroked her gently, letting his hand rest on her breasts; as he watched, her face wore a serenity he had not noticed before. Her angularities and self-assertiveness were gone. He was struck by the elegance of her form and features, suddenly saw her as an abstraction-perhaps a goddess to be worshipped, not to be disturbed or defiled with coarse fingers. Very gently he withdrew his hand and edged away. But she suddenly turned over on her side and with her eyes still closed, threw her arms around his neck and drew him nearer and lay unminded as he fingers fumbled with her clothes. He was overwhelmed by her thought. He believed not to surrender and thought that this was their true moment of consummation. He believed no need to feel guilty any more, under his roof. The bride had come home.

(c) Raman took out his bicycle. Waited till the Chevrolet turned around the fountain and disappeared in smoke in the direction of the New Extension and on the mountain road. He looked at the key in his hand and slung it into the dry fountain-an act which somehow produced the great satisfaction or having his own way at last. He mounted his cycle and turned towards The Boardless-the solid, real world of sublime souls who minded their own business.

Extract (A) present the moment of encounter when Raman's joke seems to turn suddenly against him, bringing him in face to face with the dread of "Jail". In his imagination, this dread grows in size and seems to become almost a scandal. The deadly psychological punch of this



encounter is delivered by the phrase "taking advantage." And that Raman has taken this punch intensely is clear in the epithet "evil". The apology at the end of this extract is also an explanation which is an attempt at fostering a line or form of understanding, Raman understands that he has committed two mistakes: first, he tried to tease, and secondly, he went beyond limits "He went too far".

Here the context is a situation within which Raman teases Daisy. Even this teasing involves for Raman a conscience of norm. It is the present of this invigilating conscience that underline Raman's inimitable trait of otherness.

Emerging from this situation of "encounter" to that of "explosion" in extract (B), there is a comprehensive range of moods. Understanding between Daisy and Raman has taken roots. And, therefore, this lawrential moment of explosive sex-situation appears. But there is a kind of poise even in a flaming sex-situation, it is a poise delicately balanced by the contrary ingredients of Raman's nature. This is the making of Raman; he has a kind of watchfulness, the otherness that makes him larger than the situation itself.

Extract (C) is the most refined, rather perfected form of the otherness Illustrated by Raman. Only in the state of disengagement or detachment does Raman have "great satisfaction". He is a "sublime" soul who minds his own business in the solid real world of Malgudi. The painter in Raman does not exist in separation from him. This mythic figure as an artist is refined out of the gross realities of everyday life in Malgudi.

The above quoted extracts Invite our attention to the fundamentals of myth embedded in Raman's nature. Raman enacts a balance between two selves-one engaged and the other disengaged. His is a mythic balance between active participation and acute withdrawal, From the very first page of the novel this painter presents himself as a medium of representing objects or signs. As the art of painting makes a basic position of neutrality in its representational character, so does not painter of Narayan (Raman) wears attitude of detachment on his sleeves, as it were Raman is the objective correlative.

The title 'The Painter of Signs' promises all these things in a simple way. It promises that the hero would finally emerge as a medium of reflecting facts of life. It is remarkable to see that Daisy does not reflect, Raman does; he just reflects. He is a purer medium. The title itself represents a kind of integration which accommodates varieties and changes. Raman of his aunt, Raman of Daisy, are integrated into Raman, the painter and that is why this painter Raman is a miniature of this ultimate nature of man. He does not change, and so he enacts a myth about the ultimate nature of man as embodied in the *Gita*.

The character of Raman is integrated in so far it integrates the patterns of myth and reality. Raman is at once a participant and an observer. That is why he sets up the constant rhythm of life. Thus, Raman becomes a perfect "objective correlative" of the profound idea of detachment in life. What matters in "The Painter of Signs" is coherence, significant relatedness in an organic whole, the centre of significance being inevitably the present; what it realizes is the full realism is the truism that life is in the present and nowhere else; it is alive in so far as it is alive for us: and what it, defines and orders in terms of its own implicit organization, is a kind



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of ideal and impersonal living memory as the decisive, the most significant, contemporary life of tradition.

This discussion enables one to see Narayan's novel as an aesthetic work leading to the final form of the mythic vision evoking the "Niskama" conduct of *The Gita* in Raman's mode of existence. Here we have Narayan's profoundest, and the highest achievement in terms of this mythic consciousness. Narayan brings about a perfect transformation of the Malgudi hero into a symbol.

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