



MYTHS AND MODERNITY: A REFLECTION IN THE WORKS OF R.K NARAYAN

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose to analyze some particular literary pieces of writing by the Indian writer R.K Narayan who has endeavoured to explore myths derived from the contemporary scenario. I wish to introduce the employment of Indian myths as a concrete base to establish R.K Narayan's use of myth and to trace how the narrative is recognized on mythic sub-text of his fictional works. And this is because, I feel, R.K Narayan's fictional works, mostly set in Malgudi, portray the peculiarities of human relationships and the ironies of Indian daily life, mingled with a special flavour of Indian myths. In his novels, one finds modern urban existence clashing with ancient tradition, within the framework of mythic narratives. I hypothesize that how myth has been contextualized in literature by R.K Narayan and the way he has used them as a sub plot.

Key words - Myths, Mythic narratives, Indian Myths, Indian fables and legends.

The term 'Myth' is derived from the Greek word "MYTHOS" means a story or word. For a better understanding one can explain it as the narratives passed on from generation to generation as stories that are based on traditional episodes. Myths are the tales that explain men's experience in the world. It can also be taken as a religious story which involves the existence and activities of a supernatural being such as a God, a Goddess and several such entities. Myth has been fascinating writers for ages. People have been using myth in different forms. For a very long period writers have been exploring myth religiously, morally, ethically and socially. A number of Indian writers have derived the themes of their writings from the mythical sources and built up their thoughts on them. Mythic thoughts give more meaning, and widen the horizon in a more thoughtful way.

We can add that myth - making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more -or - less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. Both for society at large and for the individual, this story -





generating function seems irrepressible. The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story (Cupitt 29).

It is noticeable that in the novels of R.K Narayan, myths are used to draw a parallel, in an effort to identify the continuity of some dominant myths in one's own time and society. R.K Narayan recognizes that myth has its authority that is not based on historiography or material proof; myth survives just by presenting itself as mystic. Hence, myths employed by R.K Narayan have a quasi - objective collective existence in the social being. Myth has always been a natural presence in Indian writings in English and has a symbolic/ allegorical/metaphorical manifestation.

In the novels of R.K.Narayan, the grand mythic Hindu narratives find a commonplace presence, relevance and contemporary significance. Narayan states:

with the impact of modern literature we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics not as some remote concoctions but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background (Narayan 1979:21).

R.K Narayan's novels project an Indianness through the presentation of Malgudi which emerges as steeped in the three thousand years old tradition of Hindu culture. The gods and demons, an integral part of the Indian tradition, are a constant source of inspiration for him. It is in this sense that R.K Narayan incorporates mythical incidents and the experiences of gods and demons, making them relevant to the people of Malgudi. R.K Narayan does not alter or modernize the myths but through their symbolic representation shows their timeless relevance as the most immediate form of human experience.

Indian fables and legends are the sources of R.K Narayan's writing. His novel *Swami and Friends* also reflects that Swami believes in the myth that the omnipresent and omniscient God has the power to convert sand into money. Therefore, he buries two pebbles in the backyard hoping and praying for divine intervention which would change the pebbles into three pie coins. When it does not bring the desired result and his hopes are dashed, he kicks at them in anger and frustration only to repent at his action, fearing the retribution of Gods. This way it is present that the myths and beliefs in the Indian psyche are so much deeply incorporated that R.K Narayan's novels project with them a feel which is truly realistic and contemporary.

R.K Naraya's popular novel *The Guide* depicts the transformation of a guide to a guru, amidst the background of Malgudi with its mythical association and the holy Sarayu emerging from near a small shrine on a peak.





It must be the source of the Sarayu mentioned in the mythological stories of Goddess Parvathi jumping into the fire; the carving on one of the pillar of the shrine actually shows the goddess plunging into the fire and water arising from the spot.(57)

The mythical element is all pervasive as the abduction of Sita by Ravana is re-enacted when Raju snatches Rosie away from her lawful husband. Rosie becomes Nalini the famous dancer, whereas Raju, to keep, Macro, her husband, away from Rosie, is caught up in the web of forgery and is imprisoned. On his release, unable to return to Malgudi, he takes refuge in an old ruined temple of Mangala where the process of his rebirth begins as stated by Willaim Walsh in "Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vinegar"(148).

Mangal, which means divine blessing, is the village ravaged by drought and Cholera and the atmosphere there is acrimonious. Raju is accepted by the villagers, especially Velan, as their Swami who takes on the age-old role of disseminating traditional wisdom. He is like the great sage Valmiki with an unsavoury past who ultimately becomes immortal through his works. The mythic space created by the use of the abandoned temple has Vedic association of a holy man in a cool grove imparting wisdom, but is ironically subverted by Raju's imposture.

Rosie initially plays the role of the temptress Maneka or Mohini and successfully distracts him from his otherwise orderly life. She is viewed as an enchantress and the first symbol associated with her is the snake. She is found watching a cobra with morbid fascination. Later, Raju's mother dubs her as the serpent girl. " She is a real snake- women, I tell you" (154), she alleges:

'Everything was so good and quite- until you came; you came in like a viper. Bah! I have never seen anyone work such havoc on a young fool! What a fine boy he used to be! The moment he set his eyes on you, he has gone. On the very day I heard him mention the 'serpent girl' my heart sank'. (170)

Thus Rosie is linked with the snake - the symbol of primordial energy that "can change form at will, from serpents to alluring young men and women" (Budhwar 56)

The novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* is a blend of myth, fable and irony. The narrator is a venerable tiger of the *Panchtantra* with a soul. The novel is a myth of *sanyasi* preaching the *Karmayoga* of the *Bhagavad Gita* and upholding the guru/sishya or teacher/ disciple relationship of Lord Krishna. and Arjuna as an ideal to attain salvation". (Prasanna 156) It is a tale of a tiger's journey from being the supreme lord of the jungle to working in the grand Malgudi Circus and ultimately rescued by a hermit. They go to the Mempri hills and spend their days in philosophical





discussion. When the draws near for the hermit to retire from the physical world, he leaves the tiger Raja at the zoo, with the hope of meeting him in the next life. Both look forward to achieving salvation as the master tells the tiger "both of us will shed our forms soon and perhaps we could meet again, who knows?" (176)

Narayan here deliberately permits his characters to utter such premeditated statements like next life and the hermit meeting the tiger after shedding off their living forms. This is the actual Indian psyche he is dealing with. The hermit's unquestioning belief in the authoritative Hindu scriptures - the Vedas and the Upanishads makes him utter such statement.

In *The Dark Room* (1938) Savitri like woman in *Mahabharata* named Sita and Shakuntala had to bear the sorrow of separation from their husbands. Though Narayan a realistic writer gives a modern version of the myth.

Through the use of myths, Narayan shows how a culture's social mores, customs, economy, view of life and relationships, etc. are related to more universal natural forces. He looks forward as well as backward, to new possibility as well as to limitation. Through myths he reveals human desires and limitations, violations and retributions, sorrow and happiness, of being and nothingness. In Indian fiction in English, many writers have creativity used myth in order to present the real and the contemporary.

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