

**R. K. Narayan: A Study in Religion and Myth**

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**ABSTRACT**

R. K. Narayan is a name in English Literature that does not need any introduction. He appears to be shining like a glittering star in the galaxy of Indian fiction writers who wrote in English. His career as a writer spanned over 60 years. He received a number of awards and honors including the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award. Narayan was also nominated to Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's Parliament. He is widely known for his simple and unpretentious writing style, often compared to William Faulkner. Most of his works show his deep interest in Hindu Religion and Myth. In this research article, a humble attempt has been made analyze the way how Narayan accepts the Hindu Religion and Myth in the lives of his protagonists. He does not alter or modernize the myths but through their symbolic representation shows their timeless relevance as the most immediate form of human experience.

In an interview with Ved Mehta, R. K. Narayan admitted to him, “.....inability to write novels without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, astrologers, pundits and Devdasis or temple prostitutes and explained his point of view by adding in his characteristic humble way that in any case that has turned out to be my India.”<sup>1</sup> He spontaneously chooses the Hindu myths and legends around which his novels are usually woven. As a matter of fact, he owes a great deal too Hindu religion that reflects in his novels. It is the Hindu way of life that has largely moulded Narayan to the core of his heart. As a result the use of myth appears almost everywhere in the novels of R. K. Narayan.

The sum and substance of the Hindu religion lies in the theory that God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscience. If one surrenders unto Him, He takes care of him/her and resolves the problems. He looks after and saves the person only when the person places his/her unconditional reliance upon Him. A. R. Kulkarni observes: “In fact two evils flow when a man places reliance upon God for the solution of the problems.....firstly, he is always dependent on God and is not prepared to take any initiative himself. There is no scope for self-reliance. Faith in God and faith in oneself run counter to each other. Secondly, this belief leads to idleness and inaction.”<sup>2</sup> This is why most of Narayan’s characters are dependent on God and appear mere puppets in the hands of fate. To most of Narayan’s characters, every phenomenon on earth is pre-ordained. They remain captive of circumstances for most part of their life. They remain frustrated either with their own self or with the people around them. Swami ( Swami and Friends ), Chandran ( The Bachelor of Arts ), Sampath ( Mr. Sampath ), Margayya ( The Financial Expert ), Jagan ( The Vendor of Sweets ), Raju, The Guide, Shrinivas of The Man Eater of Malgudi and Savitri of The Dark Room are all utterly helpless creatures in the hands of fate. To illustrate the point, we take the example of Savitri of The Dark Room. She runs away from home in protest against her husband’s illegal love affair with a trainee officer working under him. But she too accepts defeat in the end. The futility, the frustration and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob. “A wretched fate that wouldn’t let me drown the first time.....this is defeat. I accept it, I am no good for this fight.”<sup>3</sup>

The most important dogma of the Hindu religion is the acceptance of the truth that God exists in the form of one Absolute OM. There is one Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar (Shiva). There are several divine forms known as gods and goddesses. Soul is immortal and ultimately it merges with God, the Divine Spirit. This is evident in the second half of The English Teacher where the death of the wife fills the hero Krishna, the English Teacher with belief that death is not the end of everything and that human personality has several other planes of existence. With this belief in mind perhaps Krishna on his wife’s death undertakes psychic contact with the spirit of his wife. He expects that finally he will be united with Susila. “A cool breeze lapped our faces. The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy, a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death.” This is on the lines the writer had

undergone when he too lost his dear wife. Narayan writes: “This outlook may be unscientific, but it helped me survive the death of my wife..... I could somehow manage to live after her death.....” 4

Hindu epics Ramayan and Mahabharat which are the backbone of Hindu religion reveal that for the woman, her husband is everything. He is equivalent to God for her. Total submission and devotion to the husband is the only way for the woman to attain peace. This is the only religion for the woman to follow. She is expected to be obedient to her husband and to maintain marital fidelity even if the husband is cruel to her and involved in debauchery. She has no right in the household property. For example, Savitri in *The Dark Room* has absolutely no rights in her own household. And yet she puts up with insult and maltreatment at the hands of her husband. But when she finds it all intolerable, she leaves the home to assert her individuality. However, she has no courage to face the challenges of life. In the end she comes back accepting total defeat.

Janamma another character in the novel, also believes that total submission to the husband leads to peace. The dictum laid down by Manu and later moralists that a woman shall have no right is so deeply embedded in the minds of both that Ramani could bluntly tell Savitri that she has no right whatsoever. Utterly helpless she repents: “In Yama’s world the cauldron must be ready for me for the sin of talking back to a husband and disobeying him, but what could I do?” It is very shocking that even in modern times Ramani quotes the ancient epics and scriptures which enjoin upon women the strictest identification with their husbands. Even Rosie who is highly educated, and leaves her husband for the sake of her aspirations, longs to die at her husband’s doorstep. How pathetic her words are: “he may not admit me over the threshold, in which event it is far better to end one’s life on his doorstep.” 5

Manu, the acknowledged Hindu law giver divides the Hindu society into four castes: the Brahmin, the Kshtriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra. In *Manusmriti*, Manu prescribes the duties of all the four divisions of the society. The duty of the Brahmin was to learn and teach; to perform yajnas and to make perform yajnas for others; and to give and take alms (donations). The duty of the Kshtriya was to protect people, to donate alms, to perform yajnas, to learn and not to involve in sensual pleasures. The Vaishyas were supposed to do agriculture and business, to protect animals, to donate alms, to learn and to make money through interest. There was assigned only one duty to the Shudras and that was to serve the above three divisions candidly. 6

Mentioning the duties of the Shudras, Bhisma said in *The Mahabharat*, “The Creator intended the shudras to become the servants of the other three orders. For this the service of the other three classes is the duty of the Shudras. By such services of the three, a Shudra may attain great happiness.”7 In *The Bhagwad Geeta* Lord Krishna says, “The fourfold system was created by Me in accordance with varying disposition and the actions ( resulting from them ).” 8 This division had become so rigid in the course of time that they had come to be degenerated into watertight

compartments. As a result, the people of one caste had no reciprocal relations with those of another caste. The people of upper three castes could at least mix with each other. But the fourth one which includes Shudras (untouchables) was totally alienated from the main stream of life. Narayan portrays this condition of the society gracefully in his novels. Raju's mother does not approve of Raju's marriage with Rosie as she belongs to a low caste family. She is at first sympathetic towards Rosie, but she changes her attitude when she learns that Rosie belongs to dancing girl class. She flares up: "Are you of our caste? No, our class? No,... After all you are a dancing girl. We do not admit them in our families." Jagan is reluctant to accept Grace as his daughter-in-law. Even Raman's aunt could not accommodate the idea of Raman's marriage with Daisy, a Christian girl. Narayan does not seem to be opposed to love marriage as he himself has gone through it. But even Narayan's love marriage could not have materialised, had Rajam belonged to a different caste. Malgudi wears a festive look on Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the town. But Shriram's Granny appears restless for the reason that he allows untouchables to touch the Hindu gods. From the conversation Mahatma Gandhi undertakes with an urchin of a sweeper occupying the Divan much to the chagrin of the Municipal Committee chairman, it becomes clear that he takes immense interest in listening him about his father's calling. The Mahatma advises him to be neat and tidy no doubt, but he never enquires of him whether he goes to school at all. This shows how the Mahatma looks at the problem.

Otherworldliness and quietism is at the root of the Hindu religion. This is seen in the attitude of many protagonists created by R. K. Narayan in his novels. Frustrated under the pressure of social customs and circumstances, they sometimes run away from the problems of life, other times they become monk and still other times they seek refuge in the philosophy of life. For instance, Krishna in *The English Teacher* finds peace in the world of spirits. Shrinivas in *Mr. Sampath* and Natraj in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* find refuge in the philosophy that the moral order establishes itself, and that, since they find nothing wrong with the world, it is absolutely unnecessary for them to do anything in the universe because all the hardships of this life will be compensated in the life hereafter. Narayan was a firm believer in the other world. In spite of the fact that he knew that the general trend of the time to come was to be rational and scientific, he believed in the age-old sacred Hindu shastras. He believed in the immortality of soul firmly. He admitted in his autobiographical book *My Days* that the psychic contact he narrated in *The English Teacher* was actually based on his own psychic experiment with the spirit of his dead wife. In addition to it, his novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* is solely devoted to represent the Hindu philosophy that made the hermit believe that he himself and the tiger were once brothers in their previous life.

Hindu religion and myth go hand-in-hand. Myth is a symbolic narrative medium transmitted through both oral and written narrative medium. It apparently relates actual events and characters of quasi-historical origins and is associated with human belief system. The meaning of myth, as given in *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, is a traditional story usually involving supernatural or

imaginary people and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena. Such stories collectively are also called myth. Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances. Time in most cases, is unspecified, understood as existing apart from contemporary human experience, dislocated from history. Myth is distinguished from symbolic behaviour and symbolic places or objects, such as temples, idols, icons etc. In most of his novels, R. K. Narayan refers to the fables and legends of India. In the early episodic novel *Swami and Friends*, it is implicit in Swami's actions and reactions that he believes in the myth that the omnipresent and omniscient God has the power to convert sand into money. He goes on to bury two pebbles in the backyard hoping and praying for divine intervention which would change the pebbles into three pie coins. When his hopes are dashed, he kicks at them in anger and frustration only to repent at his action, fearing the retribution of gods.

R. K. Narayan's novel *The English Teacher* is highly supernatural and autobiographical. Krishna in *The English Teacher*, after the loss of his wife, pines for the wife Susila, grief-stricken and desolate. The experiments in psychic communication with Susila, his dead wife with the help of a medium, introduces a whimsical or fantastical element into the story that has so long been very much truthful to life. Automatic writings and attempts at psychic contact with the dead are not altogether uncommon. Beginning as an interesting account of domestic felicity, it later gets bogged down in the so called spiritual things and philosophic discussions, which have in them, no grain of truth at all. Even the writer's own psychic contacts with the spirit of his dead wife that has occasioned the novel, is but a hallucination on his part. The profound realization that dawns upon the protagonist, the end as the unmitigated loneliness, is the only truth of life that makes him survive the death of his beloved wife. Narayan's recording in his memoir *My Days* of the event of his wife's death deserves attention here: "More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction. The English Teacher of the novel, Krishna is a fictional character in the fictional city of Malgudi; but he goes through the same experience I had gone through, and he calls his wife Susila, and the child is Leena instead of Hema. The toll that typhoid took and all the desolation that followed, with a child to look after, and the psychic adjustments, are based on my own experience<sup>9</sup>.

For R. K. Narayan, death is not a full stop. As he states in *The English Teacher*, it is more of a comma, with each hiatus leading to the birth of a new identity which replaces the previous one. But the western concept of identity as a mask is against Narayan's oriental philosophy. His protagonists do not merely play one role after the other, they live out one existence, which is not a performance but pure reality. As a *Spectator Review* once put it, his success lies in portraying the 'extra-ordinary ordinariness' of day-to-day life. Narayan is steeped in Hindu philosophy, and though he discards many of its notions, he assimilates the basic truths. As he says in *The English Teacher*: My knowledge of past, present and future strictly pertain to this life. Beyond that I have nothing to say, because I believe I shall once again be resolved into the five elements of which I

am composed: and my intelligence and memory may not be more than what we see in air and water!

Those who try to find existentialism, nihilism, magic realism, and all other kinds of 'ism' in Narayan's works will be disappointed, since western concepts have little to do with his vision of life. As a detailed reading shows, Narayan is steeped in Hindu philosophy, and though he discards many of its notions, he assimilates the basic truths. Narayan does not seem to support the theory of Karma, but at the same time he does not support the Epicurean theory of 'carpe diem' or 'seize the day'. Our deeds in this life will have repercussions in this life only, and through the realisation of our follies and delusions comes wisdom. He believes in making our faculties and experiences useful in this life, rather than accumulating them for an after-life. Narayan's view is that wisdom is not gained through meditation, or by spiritual contemplation, but by going through the experiences that life has to offer.

Raju in *The Guide* has an ordinary childhood, an extra-ordinary love affair, a parasitic life which extends to his term in jail. In plain and simple words, Narayan portrays a normal Indian man in different circumstances. What happens to Raju has something in common with what happens to Savitri in *The Dark Room* when she tries to commit suicide after being driven out by her husband, to the headmaster in *The English Teacher* when he does not die on the day an astrologer predicted that he would, to Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* when his son Mali violates all his notions of life, and to Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* when he renounces everything and becomes a sanyasi. They all die a death, but this death is not an end but the starting point of a new life. 10 As Narayan says about Chandran when he becomes a sanyasi because he couldn't marry a young girl called Malathi.

Others may renounce with a spiritual motive or purpose . . . But Chandran's renunciation was nothing of that kind. It was an alternative to suicide. Through this symbolic death, however, emerges a Chandran who realises that he had been 'humbugging through life' and comes back to the mainstream, a thoroughly changed man. The ending of *The Guide* leaves us an unresolved problem. Does Raju die at the end of the novel? No. For the first time Raju has done something without any profit for himself, and the moment he has accomplished this selfless task he has renounced his previous life. Hence we are witnessing his rebirth, not death, and this is reinforced by the image of Raju as a baby. Like a phoenix, Raju annihilates the past and recreates himself.

Similarly, after her failed attempt at suicide, Savitri could be said to experience rebirth. She almost settles down to a new life, but has to go back to her previous existence since very strong bonds exist between her and her married life, especially in the form of her children. For Raju, the headmaster and Jagan, life has been renewed, as is evident in Jagan's statement near the end of the novel: 'I am a free man'. But for Savitri, being a woman makes it impossible for her to attain this freedom. Throughout *The Dark Room* Narayan portrays the helplessness of Indian

women. Throughout his work Narayan focuses how unique experiences change our vision of life. Raju's meeting with Rosie and his subsequent term in jail, Krishnan's sense of loss at the death of his wife Sushila, Jagan's clash of ideals with his son Mali, Chandran's infatuation for Malathi and his consequent sanyas, all change their perspective of life. Life to Narayan is the greatest teacher. The headmaster in *The English Teacher* tells us: 'You may treat me as dead or as one who has taken Sanyasa Ashrama'.

Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*, showing a similarity with Raju, says: At some stage in one's life one must uproot oneself from the accustomed surroundings and disappear.

These statements also support the view that most of Narayan's characters are in quest of inner peace and freedom from the collective. Krishna tells us in *English Teacher*, on his day of retirement: 'Let me assure you I'm retiring, not with a feeling of sacrifice for a national cause, but for a very selfish purpose. I'm seeking a great inner peace'.

This freedom, however, does not make them selfish. This is almost the Hinayana form of Buddhism where the salvation of the self is followed by the salvation of others. Raju's penance is for the greater common good, just as are the headmaster's and Krishna's. And *The Vendor of Sweets* ends with Jagan's statement that he will look after Grace, as is evident in his words, 'It's a duty we owe her.'

Instead of looking for threads of Existentialism, Narayan's characters can be analysed in the light of the Buddhist concept of Nirvana. Nirvana is a state of utter extinction, not of existence, but of passions and suffering; it is a state beyond the chain of causation (in the case of Raju), a state of freedom (Jagan). It is in addition a state of bliss (the headmaster). It is the truth of utter selflessness and insubstantiality of things, of the emptiness of the ego, and of the impermanence of all things. With the realization of this truth, ignorance is destroyed, and, consequently, all craving, suffering, and hatred is destroyed with it (Chandran).

Narayan states his law of life in *The English Teacher*: The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life. This view is complimented in *The Vendor of Sweets*: We are blinded by our attachments. Every attachment creates a delusion and we are carried away by it. Raju, Chandran, Krishna, and Jagan all try to escape from this law by clinging to various kinds of attachment, be it love for a woman, or for one's son but realisation does eventually come to them all. Thus, all religion and myth exhibited in Narayan's novels centres round his own vision of life.

Hindu religion is inseparably associated with Astrology which is so closely associated with Indian Mythology. Astrology is the study of the movements and relative positions of celestial bodies as having an influence on human affairs and the natural world. Not only R. K. Narayan but his protagonists also believe in Astrology. Many of the protagonists in his novels are staunch in his faith in Astrology and thus, in fatalism. They believe that wrong matching of horoscopes of the bride and the bridegroom results in calamity or even death of either of the two. For example, in *The Bachelor of arts* Chandran's father takes initiative in sending one Mr. Shastrigal to the house of the bride (Malthi) to bring about the settlement. Horoscopes were exchanged. But the bride's father D. W. Krishnan Iyer was so orthodox in his attitude that he rejected the proposal outright, saying that Chandran's horoscope was ill-matched. "I know a little of Astrology myself. I am prepared to overlook many things in a horoscope. I don't usually concern myself with the factors that indicate prosperity, wealth, progeny, and all that. I usually overlook them. But I do feel that we can't ignore the question of longevity. I know hundreds of cases where the presence of Mars in this house (of horoscope).....I can tell you that....." He hesitated to say it. "It kills the wife soon after the marriage, he said, when pressed by Chandran's father."11 D.W. Krishnan holds the same belief when he says in his letter to Chandran's father: "However we can only propose. He on the Trupati Hills alone knows what is best for us." In *The Financial Expert*, even Margayya who is modern in outlook never spared a dig at the custom of tallying horoscopes as a preliminary to marriage. He seems to believe in Astrology up to some extent though he could not uproot himself from the religious taboos fully. This is in keeping with R. K. Narayan's vision that the law of life cannot be avoided.

R. K. Narayan's remarkable popularity lies in his extraordinary gift of storytelling, with the heady mixture of Indian myths and lore. This adds to their appeal. Narayan's creative brilliance is visible in his use of myth as a strategy to present contemporary truth. His Malgudi and its inmates acquire a mythical aura- the village, the Nallappa grove, the Sarayu River, etc. accentuate this. His 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. Myth cannot be relegated to the world of obscurity since it is not a dead form. 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.

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