

Romantic Irony in R.K.Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*

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Introduction:

With the death of R.K.Narayan in May of 2001, India lost perhaps its most prominent literary figure. R.K.Narayan is a great novelist who still lives in the mind of readers India as well as abroad. Narayan had more 'spell-bound power' and offered a more consistent, prolific output over sixty six more years than any of the other internationally acclaimed Indian writers of fiction in English. Novelist, Graham Greene was an admirer of his novels and has said about Narayan, "Since the death of Evelyn Waugh, Narayan is the novelist I most admire in the English language". A number of R. K. Narayan studies have traced in his novels-humour, irony, burlesque pattern, romantic comedy, novel of ideas and fable. He has always been drawn to the lives of 'ordinary' men and women, taking us inside the experiences of people who remind us of own neighbours, or our siblings – or ourselves. Narayan's narration skill gained wide recognition. He once observed about himself as "no more than a story-teller". He has created for his oeuvre a complex and realistic city, Malgudi, generally considered the literary synthesis of Mysore, where Narayan has lived much of his life, and Madras, where he was born. His readers become a part of Malgudi itself: its streets, its smell and its colourful people. It is the creation of an entire fictive world- perhaps best characterised as William Faulkner's 'Yoknapatawpha', country turned upside down-Faulkner's vision remains essentially grotesque, but Narayan's has been predominantly comic.

Plot-Review:

'*The Painter of Signs*' has been serialised in July-September 1976 issues of the magazine "The Illustrated Weekly of India". It was the time of the emergency of India. Narayan is the novelist of the common man. Such a common man is Ram in this novel. He is the young painter of sign boards in Malgudi. His customers were shop-keepers, lawyers, Bangle sellers and others. Raman was proud of his work and he had his own philosophy of painting and colour combination. He lived a gay free life as he had only traditional aunt.

Once, Raman got an order for a signboard from the family planning officer. His work was appreciated by Daisy who was in-charge of the family planning of mission of Malgudi and Raman finds himself touring the nearby villages in the company of Daisy who is a born tyrant and order everybody around her, including Raman. They go to a mountain village and Daisy lectures to the rustics about family planning. But she meets her counter-part in the village priest of the temple when barren women go to pray for children. The priest does not permit Daisy and even Raman to paint a birth-control slogan on the walls of the temple.

Going back from the village becomes a trial. The bus to Malgudi fails to make its appearance. So Raman and Daisy had to hire a bullock cart to complete a part of their journey. The Cart man mistakes them for a newly married couple and Raman enjoys this misunderstanding because he was deeply fallen in love with Daisy. The ride in the cart gives him the proximity he was praying for. He asks Daisy a number of questions about family planning and she discourses on family planning methods quite objectively. On the way the bullock stumbles and hurts its leg. The cart man goes to the nearby villages to get another bullock and Daisy and Raman had to spend the night under a lonely tree-Raman sleeping on the ground under the cart and Daisy sleeping on the cart. Raman had so many ideas about expressing his love for Daisy and so when everything was quiet, he climbed into the cart to make love Daisy. But Daisy had foreseen all this and was not there. Daisy had passed the night on the branch of the tamarind tree back. She tried to scold Raman and they almost quarrelled. She got out of the cart, asking the cart man to take Raman away. In the morning the cart man came with the bullock and Daisy and Raman got into it in strained silence. At last they catch the bus and reach Malgudi where Daisy leaves him without a word. He moped and brooded for over a week but at last he decided to take up the normal threads of life.

After some days Daisy came to Raman's backyard where he was working and their courtship starts. They go for a walk on the river bank, hold hands and tell each other's life story. Raman decides to marry Daisy and tells his aunt his decision. Then she was adamant. She could not have a Christian wife for Raman. She proposes to go away to Benaras on a pilgrimage. Daisy advises Raman to allow his aunt to go to Benaras. Raman, therefore, goes about making all the preparations for his aunt's pilgrimage. Gradually, he also realises how totally his aunt had dedicated herself to his well-being. But the emotional pull drew him to Daisy. Raman's aunt leaves for the Ganges where she will spend the remainder of her life in religious observances. Raman has given his aunt's life a purpose which had not expected.

At last Raman tried to take Daisy in his arms but she shook him off ceremoniously, saying 'Time and Place for everything'. Before she will marry Raman, Daisy said that she did not want children. She agrees to marry him if they have separate lives and Raman should do all the household chores. Fascinated by her strong will, Raman accepts her conditions. Raman wondered what type of married life his was going to be. Gradually he sat near her and put his arm round her. Later on he asked her when she would like to move into his house. She said that tenth will be all right. Then they had a happy time.

On the ninth, Raman went to Daisy's office. There he found a pre-change in her. When he broached the subject of shifting her goods, she declared that it was impossible. She told him that it was the end of their affair. She declared that she couldn't live except alone. She was a dedicated worker to her work. She is even ready to leave Malgudi. She wanted him to forget her. She left Malgudi, leaving Raman to take out his bicycle and start his neglected job as a painter of signs again. This sudden twist in the novel is the Romantic irony. The intrigue is light. The love-affair is salted half-seriously and half-humorously but quite realistically.

Conflicts in the Novel:

Scenes between Raman and Daisy reflect the changes in the role of women in society, as women become more assertive and liberated. The novel contains the preoccupation with human character and human relationships. As Raman finds himself being torn between his aunt and Daisy, the traditional way and the modern way, we see the protagonist as being 'in between' in the town Malgudi. The author tells the story mainly, with objectivity and detachment.

Narayan is a master of the domestic scene and so he presents the major and minor conflicts of family through the different points of view of the participants. Respect for his characters and a good-humoured presentation of their issues give warmth to his scenes and allow the reader to feel real sympathy with the characters. Raman and Daisy's love affair comes to us in typical Narayan style-funny and quixotic and sad. Both Raman and Daisy are the peculiar persons who symbolised the general without loss of individuality. They are the typical Narayan characters who can tolerate one another for a short time only.

Like most of Narayan's oeuvre, the plot is not the strong point of this novel. It is the characters and the descriptions that purl it through. His powers are in five form-capturing a time and place and an intellectual climate. He satirizes the New India as well as the old; reason and spirituality are both mocked. His satire is gentle. He treats human sentimentalism, selfishness, manners and meanness, with sympathy and compassion. So, *The Painter of Signs* induces the atmosphere of orthodox middle-class life and society.

Critique:

In *The Painter of Signs*, R.K.Narayan achieves much of his art through economy, which he has in masterly measure. His is a prose tailored exactly to the task at hand, a prose without ego. One skill, discerns that Narayan has a true subject in *The Painter of Signs* the incursion of the modern on the traditional, the primitive Indian subject. His is the comedy that cuts deep, yet does not bruise.

Sexuality is a main ingredient in this modern Narayan Book which is presented in a very humorous way, without any hint of hesitation. Raman is shown as a person rooted in sexuality and intense passion, quite opposite to his lady love whose only aim in life seems to be the sterilization of the Indian population. The comic sexual drive of Raman for Daisy is very comic in the part two of the novel.

It seems undecided whether Daisy is to be considered a protagonist or ant-protagonist. Some critics view her as a "dangerous, disruptive, and fanatical nun wedded to her goal, how to destroy the Malgudian order of things" or as a normal hearty and highly intelligent girl who wants her share of happiness on earth". Like in Arundhati Roy's "God of Small Things", love is dictated by Caste. India's Caste System dictates the social class of each individual. Class and marriage go hand in hand. Raman's aunt, his only living relative, is concerned as to which caste Daisy belongs. Unless Daisy's Caste is high enough, Raman's aunt will not allow the couple to marry.

Daisy, being a family planning propagationist becomes very unpopular among the women of Malgudi. Her background is not known. The rumours say that she is a run-away girl. Her background is not known is considered a great issue. Daisy is believed to be a Christian as her name in English. However viewed, Daisy offers something new and different to Malgudi. In addition to what she offers, her character becomes a vehicle to better understanding of Malgudi. By constantly travelling around the town and in the country-side, Daisy helps to create a place of Malgudi making it central. Whether liked or disliked, Daisy offer a memorable addition to Malgudi.

Starting from 'Savitri' in *The Dark Room* (1939) to Bala in *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), Narayan's Women Characters grow stronger and show that emergence of the New Woman is not a myth or a utopia. R. K. Narayan's new woman has certainly emerged, and she has left an indelible mark on the Indian psyche. However, this new woman imported from the rich treasure of Indian Culture. She has a strong base of Indianness and is deeply entrenched in value, traditions and ethos that are exclusively Indian in form and content. Narayan's new woman like Daisy is bold, self-reliant and assertive. She struggles for freedom, asserts equality and searches for identity. In the process, she empowers not only herself but also her man. Narayan's new woman is involved in bringing positive changes not only in her man but also in the society. So this thinking about Daisy is unambiguous or incorrect. Daisy claims to have little time for love, even though she seems to need it as much as Raman, and eventually drops Raman after agreeing to marry him. The Novel ends with Raman trying to feel relieved, trying to recover his old life of idleness in Malgudi. This is Romantic Irony or Irony of self-betrayal in the novel. Raman finds that he has lost his beloved aunt but not gained a wife to replace her. Narayan's discrete narrative voice is never one-sided dogmatic. As he tells in *A Tiger for Malgudi*- human ties cannot define in just black-and-white terms and it is masters of Romantic irony such as R. K. Narayan who make us or readers fully aware of their complexity.

. This novel is a wry, bitter sweet theme, set in R. K. Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi. No doubt, *The Painter of Signs* would be categorised into 'Good Books'.

Works Cited:

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