QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN R. K. NARAYAN'S *THE PAINTER OF SIGNS*

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Abstract:

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami, popularly known by Graham Greene's sobriquet R. K. Narayan, is noted for his remarkable gift of story-telling, extraordinary depiction of the ordinary oddities and angularities of the masses, and above all, penetrating portrayal of Indian social reality rooted in tradition, customs and rituals. The world of Narayan's writings reflects the ideals and values he cherishes and wishes to treasure as the precious heritage of Indian culture. While depicting life as he sees it as a cavalcade of social life passing every day, he finds that it is deep-rooted in the soil of the place. It has its values, mores, norms, customs and conventions followed, preserved, nurtured and protected by people. R. K. Narayan suggests that faith is the foundation stone of family life, particularly married life. Conjugal happiness subsists on marital faith and fidelity, love and loyalty. Despite its drawbacks and defects marital faithfulness is regarded as the most precious and lasting element in Indian culture.

The Painter of Signs is a novel teeming with clashes between tradition and modernity from the beginning to the end. The cause for the conflict is no doubt, the education which brought western values into the Indian minds. The elder generation of Malgudi, the miniature of Southern India, is illiterate and hence conservative. Raman, the hero of *The Painter of Signs*, is a graduate but he is not affected by the modern trends, beliefs and practices.

Key words: adventurous, culture, identity, independence, marriage, modernity, tradition, western.

Introduction:

The journey of the quest for independence and identity on a woman's part is the theme of the novel *The Painter of Signs*. The heroine Daisy wanted to be free from all the chains of marriage and social system. Daisy was a very young and ultramodern girl who had left her parents' house in adolescence since she did not want to get married and live the life of a traditional married Indian woman. She completed her education in a missionary school and took up the profession of a kind of Ladies Health Visitor cooperating with zeal for population control, abortions, contraceptives etc. in the interest of the welfare of the rural folk. Raman, a young painter of the sign boards, with modern ideas got attracted towards her and wanted to marry her. But Daisy did not encourage his emotions but by and by they became good friends. They started living together in spite of the opposition Raman had to face from his Aunt and other members of his community. Raman proposed to Daisy for marriage but she was reluctant to accept that kind of bondage as marriage frightened her. On their agreement to start living under the same roof, which was Daisy's concept of marriage, she told Raman outright that she would not be cooking food at home nor would she bear any child for him. Raman outwardly agreed to every condition laid down by her bur in his heart of heart he brooded over the prospects of his married life with Daisy. He promised Daisy to let her go on living in her own way. On the day when Raman went to take Daisy to his home, she communicated her decision not to live under any kind of bondage, and departed for a life of her own style.

Raman could not digest or accommodate Daisy's idea of family planning though he was educated and knew the gravity of population problem in the country. Hence the conversation between them on the issue often created conflicts. Daisy told Raman:

"I am going on a tour of the surrounding villages for an initial survey, and to look out for places where we can write our message on the walls permanently. The headquarters want a picture of a family—a couple with two children, with the message 'We are two; let ours be two; limit your family'—in all the local languages."

Raman could not share her seriousness and began to laugh.

She was offended and said, "I see no joke in this." (*The Painter of Signs* 55-56)

As part of birth control campaign Daisy and Raman went to a remote village and were welcomed by a teacher to his house. She told the teacher that their work had to start before the monsoon began because the birth rate grows up during the monsoon. But this notion was timidly contested by the teacher. Daisy proved through statistics that in that village there was an increase of twenty percent population from last year. She continued, "Our quantum of population increase every year is equal to the total population of a country like Peru, that's fourteen million."

"What if!" said the foolhardy teacher. "We have enough space in this country—still so many undeveloped areas. . . ." She said quietly, "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?" (*The Painter of Signs* 67). Though the teacher is educated and ought to teach the pupils the necessity of birth control, he is driven by the traditional concepts of family. Narayan here attacks the teacher's ignorance of the national problems.

Daisy came to Raman's house after she had left him for several days. They had parted earlier unpleasantly since he had behaved to her in an objectionable manner. They went now to the river steps and sat there. To quote from the text:

He threw a look at her, and felt drawn to her. He edged a few inches nearer involuntarily.

She did not move away, but said, "Don't try to get into trouble again."

He merely said, "I like you, I feel lost without you."

> "Better than getting lost along with me," she mumbled on. '"I love you,' 'I love you,' are words which can hardly be real. You have learnt them from novels and Hollywood film perhaps. When a man says, 'I love you' and the woman 'I love you'—it sounds mechanical and unconvincing. Perhaps credible in western society, but sounds silly in ours. People really in love would be struck dumb, I imagine." (*The Painter of Signs* 125-126)

She is in contrast to the traditional Raman.

Daisy started narrating her past to Raman. She spoke of her childhood in some village home where her father owned fields, gardens and orchards; theirs was a large joint family consisting of numerous brothers, sisters, uncles, sisters-in-law, grand-aunts, and cousins. Of this population fifteen were children. ""I sometimes wished I could be alone; there was no time or place to consider what one should do or think. Practically no privacy. . . . But I did not like so much common living"" (*The Painter of Signs* 128). Her longing for privacy and the concept of nuclear family was the result of her western education.

The Western attitude to work and social changes is emphasized in Daisy's character. Like any western woman she is highly independent. Unlike many Indian women, Daisy is courageous, adventurous, determined and industrious. She shows superiority over men. Daisy is willing to take risks and confront dangers. She possesses more masculine character than feminine. To certain extent she is even tyrannical. "Her zeal acquires an obsessive, puerile quality that reflects no less pejoratively on Raman. Western influence, in spite of the text's accommodation of the Western reader, is being critiqued quite rigorously through Daisy and Raman" (Carter 114).

Daisy is adventurous in spirit and haughty in manner. That she has the tenacity of will is evident in the resistance she brings to bear on the Christian missionary organization to foil its attempt to convert her. In return to the help she received from it she agreed to change her name to Daisy. Trained in social work by Christian missionaries, she espouses the cause of arresting the population growth by educating the poor people like slum-dwellers and rustics about the need of having nuclear families. "The choice of profession itself reflects her radical thinking. She does not do so out of compulsion, but out of a desire to something unusual in life. May be, she wants to have an identity distinct from others of her sex" (Mehta 85). Feminism which originated in the West influenced Narayan, and through him Daisy.

Malgudi, certainly, is not the place to welcome Daisy. "That is the reason why the author gives her a 'non-denominational name' making her almost nameless; also he lets her go away from Malgudi. He

does this because he probably does not wish to defeat Daisy by letting an able and fiery woman fall into the traditional rut" (Bande 107). Daisy is a great force to reckon with. "She is not just a suave bureaucrat who got sign-boards written and files completed and properly knotted with red-tape; she has 'a furnace of conviction (p. 47) and so she could not be trifled with" (Bande 107). Unlike the traditional Indian woman portrayed so far in Indian English fiction, Daisy is "both cold and warm, feminine and masculine. She has a 'smiling side to her and a non-smiling one; a talkative and non-speaking' . . ." (Bande 110).

While Daisy discards all history or tradition inimical to her rigid philosophy of life, Raman is unable to face the kind of reality she is so bent on maintaining at all costs. "Unlike her, he finds comfort in the very tradition he is trying to reject. He is deeply rooted in tradition as he is in his home, neither of which he can relinquish as easily as he sometimes wishes" (Prakash 196).

Narayan, through this, points out that the Malgudi of 1972 is not the old Malgudi. Young men are around. To quote P. S. Sundaram:

The fact that Family Planning is no longer a matter to be talked in whispers but has an officer specially deputed to get it carried out—and that, too, a young woman—shows how far the country, and along with it Malgudi has advanced since the time Swami went to a Missionary school to listen to contemptuous remarks about his country's gods by a Christian teacher.

But a single Daisy, in spite of her name, does not make either for Europeanization or modernity. Even a name plate cannot be hung except at the hour fixed by an astrologer, and the letters on the plate have to be slanted to the left because that is what brings luck to one whose ruling star is Saturn . . . Raman's aunt is not the only one to go on a pilgrimage to Banares; with her go women belonging to a younger generation. And Daisy herself for all her modernity does not believe in the West and its love and romance. (99)

Narayan seems to dread the fate of the male in the new social order based on rejections—Raman's aunt rejects the new, liberated woman and opts for freedom to pursue her God; Raman rejects his aunt's God in his quest for rational approach to life; and finally, there is Daisy rejecting everything for her freedom as an individual. "Comically, Raman shrugs off all ties when he paddles toward the so-called stability of the 'Boardless', proclaiming it to be the only 'solid, real world of sublime soul's (p. 143). But one wonders: will the 'Boardless' ever substitute the 'solid, real' security of a home'" (Bande 102).

The issues of sexual politics, romantic love, marriage, family planning and women's liberation are sign-posted within a design of ironic humour in this novel. In the words of Syd Harrex, "Three main characters—Raman, his aunt, and Daisy—surrounded by vividly idiosyncratic minor players enact a drama of deflated romance and ironic cross-purposes which compares and contrasts ideas of womanhood from India and the West" (75).

Narayan has not placed the female protagonist, as is conventionally done, as the guardian of tradition and culture in this novel. Still Daisy in the traditional sari embodies the post-colonial tussle between modernity and tradition. In the words of Harleen Singh, "In this novel, surprisingly, cultural gender roles are reversed. Unlike the usual description of the Indian woman as the sentinel of culture, Narayan posits the educated Raman as the one who is incapable of throwing off the yoke of tradition, and Daisy as the revolutionary figure—though neither of them unproblematized" (199-200).

Daisy and Raman wanted to paint birth control messages on the wall of a shrine in the village. An old man who was the priest and the owner of the shrine appeared there. He said that he had built the temple and installed the goddess of plenty there long ago. He continued, ""Barren women come and pray here for three days, and conceive within thirty days."

Daisy looked shocked. This was going to prove the antithesis of all her mission, defeat her entire business of life" (*The Painter of Signs* 70).

Raman returned from the shrine to join Daisy. They were getting ready to leave the place. To quote from the novel:

The hermit's attack still rankled in her mind. "I fear we have to contend against that man's propaganda."

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> "Let's not talk about him. He understands what goes on everywhere. . . . I am telling you that he knows all that is said and done anywhere. Note necessary to go and speak to him again."
>
> "Oh master, you must rise above all such superstitious fears." (*The Painter of Signs* 79)

Though Raman is equally educated as Daisy he still has some grip of religion on him. He is not as rational as Daisy. Even today there are a good number of educated Indians who believe in the supernatural powers of such fake *sanyasis.*

Raman and Daisy had agreed to have their marriage in a very simple manner. Of the five kinds of marriage, they had chosen the simplest one.

They had come to the conclusion that the system called *Gandharva* was the most suitable one for them; that was the type of marriage one read about in classical literature. When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for. Daisy said that although she had no faith in any ancient customs, she would accept it, since it seemed to her a sensible thing. (*The Painter of Signs* 158)

The agreement between Raman and Daisy proclaims that they are very rational even in the conduct of a very serious and consequential ritual of their life. Such couples are very rare.

After the aunt had gone to Banares, Raman changed aunt's *puja* room into Daisy's bed room. He took the idols of the gods and kept them in a cupboard. Then one day Daisy visited him and he showed her the room meant for her. To quote from the text:

> When they peeped into the *puja* room he had said, "This will be your bed room, you can put up the table and chair." She looked in and remarked, "I remember seeing your aunt's gods on the stand here. Where are they?"
>
> "Safe in that cupboard there," he said.
>
> "Is it safe?" she exclaimed in a mock fright. "Will the gods not smite us for this effrontery?" Raman laughed at the notion, rather loudly and artificially. Following this they engaged themselves in theological jocularities.
>
> "Can you lock up a god?" she asked.
>
> "Why not?" Raman said, falling into the mood.
>
> "What locksmith can produce a lock strong enough? While human safe-breakers work their way through the strongest lock, can't a god do as much?" she seemed to be in an extraordinarily frivolous mood now.
>
> "Why, would you be afraid to stay alone in the room? I'll transfer them to another cupboard in the hall . . . . Anyway, my aunt has complete trust in the gods and possesses greater serenity than anyone else I have known."
>
> "If so, why move the gods? Leave them undisturbed in their old place," she said lightheartedly. (*The Painter of Signs* 170-171)

It is obvious that though Raman and Daisy are rational they are not atheists. They may be agnostics. What they attack and object to is the superstitions. Hence, they don't believe in rituals and ceremonies in the name of religion. Though they don't worship gods they never challenge them.

Conclusion:

The novel highlighted the change in human outlook with regard to some of the cherished ideals, established institutions and accepted values. The general trend of the time is to be scientific and rational. Bhardwaj opines:

The ideals of family obedience and reverence to elders in the family are gradually dropped for the sake of keeping one's individuality intact. Daisy refuses to pay obeisance to her would-be-in-laws, and Raman considers it odious to fall at anybody's feet. Daisy rebels against her parents' wishes and domestic orthodoxies. Raman can impertinently dispense with his aunt to achieve his romantic freedom. The institution of marriage is gradually losing its traditional form. In Daisy's view if a man and woman are willing to live together, they are as good as married. (174)

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