

Myth and Tradition as Elements of Plot : An Analysis of R.K. Narayan's The Financial Expert

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Narayan's unmediated fidelity with life has taken his novels to a constricted experience. He has a genuine sincerity in searching and recording the Indian culture, myth, tradition and religious values to the readers of both the halves of the globe. His works express a peculiar piety towards the existence of Indian life. It means Narayan's fictional characters are not just the conscious driven characters but they are directly driven by the real experience of life. Accordingly Narayan's novels are found without any discrepancy with the representation of Indian life, culture, characters and sensibility. With relation to Indian English writer's achievement and success of Indian sensibility Prof. C.D. Narsimhaiah writes:

The Indian novel in English has shown a capacity to accommodate a wide range of concerns: in Mulk Raj Anand a humane concern for the underdog, not just a preoccupation with economic determinism; in R.K. Narayan the comic mode as equivalent to the tragic in his evocation of mediocrity; and K. Nagarajan surprises by his sensitive handling of the human significance in the religious and the logical labyrinth so characteristic of Hindu society. While Raja Rao recaptures the magnificent mythical imagination of Indian antiquity successively in the three novels and short stories he has written to date he has at the same time, to use T.S. Eliot's words 'altered' the 'expression' to accommodate a distinct, profoundly Indian sensibility. (P 68)

The art of Narayan, with relation to myth and reality is identified by A.S. Dasan as

. . . part of mainstream comic tradition of the world literature. Mythic realism that exudes stoical perception and transmutation of facts in his own inimitable style is the corner stone and operative agent in his literary canons. (p 83)

Accordingly, Narayan, writing novels of Indian sensibility with myths and traditions upholds concurrently the literary canon and structure of English novel in a skillfully maintained order to fit the Indian life in the structure of English novel. In view of this, Narayan's representation of Indian life, particularly of myth and tradition, and the maintenance of English novel structure is the objective of the present writing.

In general the structure of the plot includes exposition, foreshadowing, inciting force, conflict, rising action, crisis, climax, falling action and resolution or denouement. In most plots, the events arise out of conflict experienced by the main character. As the character makes choices and tries to resolve the problem, the story's action is shaped and plot is generated. In most stories, these events arise out of conflict experienced by the main character. Conflict is the essence in creating the fiction and plot. Rising action is the event or character that triggers the conflict. Most plots develop because a character is in a situation involving conflict.

In the maintenance of this structure of the plot sometimes myth inclines to embrace the entire lives of characters in a novel. In this aspect myth and literature has causal connection. In this connection the formal selection of myth encompasses the innumerable shared characteristics of narratives, characters, image and theme. They are connected by number, degree and diversity of similarities between specific myth and individual work of literature. The myths are in the light of patterned resemblances to figures, actions, plots, meanings or significances associated with myths or the culturally sanctioned tales of a civilization's gods and heroes.

Accordingly, the present argument, in spite of considering the examination of Narayan's novel under the perspectives of myth criticism, considers the myths and traditions that Indian culture believes and follows, used in the novel to examine them in developing the plot of the novel- *The Financial Expert* (1952).

Interestingly, Narayan is found using tradition in the form of belief, a story, an incident, a practice, rites or custom either consciously or unconsciously in the novels. On the whole both the myth and tradition in the selected novel is examined from the literary perspectives to examine their influences in bringing the foreshadowing, conflicts, crisis, climax and falling of action in the construction of the plot.

Narayan's construction of plots seems simple at the basic level. But in fact they are cautiously structured based on the existing beliefs, practices, customs, mythical elements, incidents, symbols, tradition and the complete life style that are in the milieu of his culture and society. In structuring the plots Narayan has amply used the above mentioned parts of life for the purpose of his narrating and structuring the plot. They are even used either intentionally or

unintentionally as forethoughts and tactics in narrating the story in his intended way. Hence his plots, when examined thoroughly and carefully, reveal the complexity they have hidden in them. The complexities in the structure of the plots are parallel to that of any English novelist.

The plot of the novel *The Financial Expert* is about the central character Margayya, the protagonist. The dramatic events of Margayya's rise and downfall in his financial venture are the focal point of the novel. In picturing the rise and downfall the author employs various techniques and devices with intelligently chosen incidents, facts, practices and beliefs associated with Indian life. The incidents associated with Indian life are inescapable with Indian myth and tradition. The author, though not relying completely on these, intelligently and timely utilises them to develop the plot and to bring his proposed meaning to the novel. With regard to the plot of the novel *The Financial Expert* William Walsh says:

Arrangement, scheme, composition, these are the terms that come at once to mind after reading *The Financial Expert*. This story of Margayya has an intricate and silken organisation, a scheme of composition holding everything together in vibrant and balanced union. (P 34)

In this rise and fall of Margayya, the financial wizard is narrated in different phases in the novel. In all these phases Margayya follows the myths in the form of rituals strictly and devotedly to fulfil his desire of earning money. In the second phase Margayya enters a different career of his life through Dr. Pal, a journalist, correspondent and author. With the assistance of Dr. Pal Margayya earns enough money by publishing a book by name "Domestic Harmony", a book about sex life. In the third phase he is found again a 'financial adviser' and money lender. Further he establishes his money lending business by receiving deposits and paying fabulous rates of interest. Everything Margayya does in his financial mission throughout the plot is motivated by his insatiable yearn for wealth and the obedient and dutifully followed myths. In the fourth phase, after losing all the money he earned Margayya thinks of restating his original business which he was doing under the banyan tree with his 'financial expertise'.

In these four phases Narayan uses and utilises various existing social practices and beliefs of myth and tradition in order to construct and develop the plot of the novel. Accordingly Margayya's desire for money is always found influencing and persuading by the myth and tradition that he has believed and even of those who suggests him. These myths and tradition join together to enhance and empower his ardent desire which is the core of the plot.

Myth has been identified and defined in various explanations and definitions. They have acquired and occupied their own identity and importance

in understanding anything based on them. Similarly they are found used copiously in the plot of the novel *The Financial Expert*. Apart from their significant contribution in the development of the plot they have even played symbolically to enhance the feeling and meaning of a situation to the reader as well as the plot of the novel.

Margayya is introduced with his everyday transaction and activities associated with myth and tradition which are well organised to develop the plot coherently. The use of these mythical and traditional practices in the novel reveals the character of Margayya who has deep faith in following tradition and customs of life around him. They even foreshadow that in the future chapters where there are influences of tradition and influence of myths in the life of the protagonist.

The influence of myth and tradition on the plot and on the life of Margayya is, for instance, in the chapter describing the meeting with the priest in order to get a solution for his present financial crisis. The meeting of the priest is an influence of traditional idea and practice of an individual or of Indian society. The plot at this moment associated with the priest reveals some of the mythical and traditional incidents which foreshadows happenings and development in the life of Margayya. Thus the incident of meeting priest is certainly an influence of tradition which is presently bringing a development and curiosity in the plot of the novel.

The use of mythical incidents not only develops the plot but also foreshadows the future events of the novel sensibly. At one particular point the priest narrates Margayya a story of mythical character 'Markandayya' which is an influencing event in the plot on the mind of Margayya. The narration of this mythical story in the plot has certainly influenced Margayya and the plot simultaneously and brings in the idea in reader that there would be an incident related to the performance of *Puja* and provides a greater chance and space to the development of the plot.

The scenes intensifying the character of Margayya to have a strong belief and trust in worshipping god and following the tradition and rituals are further more given in this part of the novel. When Margayya and the priest reach the temple the author provides some more narration related to the mythical story and characters associated with the *Ramayana*.

Further in the same scene the narration related to myth and tradition continues. Margayya followed the priest into the shrine. The priest asks him to squat on the floor and offers him a tumbler of milk which he says that would make Margayya alright. Margayya refuses to drink milk. But the priest tells him:

"Milk is one of the forms of Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. When you reject it or treat it indifferently, it means you reject her. She is a Goddess who always stays on the tip of her

toes all the time, ever ready to turn and runaway. There are ways of wooing and keeping her. When she graces a house with her presence, the master of our house becomes distinguished, famous and wealthy.” Margayya reverently touched the tumbler and very respectfully drank the milk, taking care not to spill even a drop. (P 35)

The narration at this point describes how Narayan has used the incidents of myth and tradition brilliantly to develop the plot and arrange the sequence in order to bring interest and curiosity in the readers. In this particular scene or incident itself Narayan has brought in profusely the incidents of myth and tradition either directly or indirectly to foreshadow the development or happenings in the life of Margayya. By the influence of myth and tradition Margayya listens from the priest that a drastic change happens in his life. Margayya. They lead to the development of the plot to make Margayya dedicate himself deeply and devotedly to perform the *Puja*. By these influences of myths and traditions the novel is further built up with incidents related to the development of the protagonist.

The mythical atmosphere is created so densely in the mind of Margayya that he is found wedged in midst of those. They have made up his mind and attitude at the moment to accept completely without second thought. They prepare him and set him to be an ardent follower of myths and traditions as he is bound to follow them obediently. Similarly, after the incident of milk the priest narrates from *The Mahabharata* the story Kubera which is again a story of based on myth. The author writes that Kubera is:

... the wealthiest man in creation, who undertook a long arduous penance as atonement for spoiling a drop of milk on the floor of his palace. When the story ended and a pause ensued, Margayya felt he could no longer keep back his request. He felt somewhat shy as he said: “I want to acquire wealth. Can you show me a way? I will do anything you suggest” (P 36)

The belief of examining one’s horoscope at the moment of difficulty in life is a usual practice of Indian society. Narayan uses this practice of the society into his plot to develop further the life of Margayya and to develop the plot of the novel. In this part the traditional atmosphere to set Margayya’s mind for the acceptance of myths is created in the following manner in the novel:

The last worshipper had prostrated on the ground before the inner sanctuary. A couple of feeble oil lamps were alight; a mixed smell of burning oil, flowers, and incense hung in the air. That was the combination of the scent which always gave Margayya a feeling of elation. He shuts his eyes. For a moment he felt that he was in a world free from all worrying problems. (P 47)

While describing the search of horoscope Narayan introduces some traditions with regard to marriage and related affairs. After the horoscope is found Margayya reads both of his and his wife’s names. The prefixes given to his name – “Chinranjivi” and to his wife’s – “Sowbhagyavathi” give the reader some humorous description as well as some irony. However, the description given in this situation introduces some more traditional pictures and practices which help to develop the plot by providing the history of Margayya’s life.

After this event Margayya takes his horoscope to the priest. His examination of the horoscope further develops the plot on the basis of myth associated with Saturn and Planetary deities and the ways to please them. The scene has further descriptions of myths and tradition which accordingly develops the plot. Margayya’s belief in myth and fear about it is described by the author as: “He felt as if Saturn were around him, and might give him a twist and lift him up to plunge him into the ocean of misery if he did not behave properly” (P 56). The priest further gives a number of rules, regulations and descriptions to perform the *Puja*. Margayya listens them carefully and agrees to follow them carefully. He even asks the priest the doubts he has about the result of his performance. The priest says:

The *Shastras* lay down such and such rituals for such and such ends. Between a man who performs them and one who doesn’t, the chances are greater for the former. That’s all I can say. The results are . . . you may have results or you may not . . . or you may have results and wish that you had failed. (P 56)

The description of traditional set up of the temple is utilised by the author to set the mind of Margayya to listen and follow whatever the priest says. Margayya becomes feeble and humble in following the instruction of the priest. Accordingly, Margayya, without second word agrees to bring his horoscope on the demand of the priest. The day he wants to search the horoscope “He sprang up from bed. In a quarter of an hour he was ready, bathed, wearing a clean dress, and his forehead smeared with red vermilion and a splash of sacred ash”. (P 52)

In the next section Margayya’s preparation and performance of *Puja* is described. In describing all, the author based on the earlier descriptions develops the plot and takes the reader to an interesting part of the novel. The description of the scene for the preparation for his *Puja* is written as follows:

He gave his wife a list of articles she should supply him with – such as jaggery, turmeric, coloured cooked rice, refined sugar, black-gram cake, sweetened sesamum, curd, spiced rice and various kinds of fruit and honey. He would require these in small quantities morning and evening for offering – and most of them were also to be his diet during the period of *Japa*. (P 58).

The narrative of Margayya's preparations is entirely a tradition and myth based description. The priest suggest to arrange pure ghee made of milk drawn from smoke coloured cow to mix with the blackened lotus petal to putting it on the forehead after the prayer. The mythical element like inscribing a certain Sanskrit syllable on a piece of deer skin is an interesting part too. Margayya's agony in finding it and the priest's instruction to find it at home as "elders have always possessed them for sitting on and praying" (P 59) are very much associated with myth and tradition. The red lotus incident has some mythical meaning and traditional values particularly while performing Lakshmi *Puja*. Accordingly the search for a red lotus makes the plot to develop the association with Dr.Pal and develops to further curious stage. However before establishing a complete association with Dr.Pal Margayya performs his *Puja* for forty days which has complete touch of tradition and myth pictures. All these represents Margayya's as well as the author's inseparable and inescapable association with myth and tradition in life and plot respectively. With such unavoidable nature of myth as well as social condition it is true to consider that myths traditions are definitely influential. Therefore the very nature myth has undeniably influenced the author and provided him with an occasion to develop the plot on the basis of myths availed in Indian life.

With such a growing dependence on the construction of the plot myths and traditions are found to be the elements of the plot itself along with the other elements. Without the myths and traditions used in the novel the construction of Margayya's life the author intended was not achievable. The myths are even associated with the tempo of the novel to bring in a drastic and sudden transformation in the life of Margayya. To enhance the argument it is significant to discuss once again the element of plot like foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing frequently serves two purposes : it builds suspense by raising questions that encourage the reader to go on and find out more about the event that is being foreshadowed. Foreshadowing is also a means of making a narrative more believable by partially preparing the reader for events which are to follow. In building up the foreshadowing different authors use different things, different events, and different subjects in different ways. Among these myth is one significant subject which authors use extensively to bring out the required effect in their works.

By these series of mythological narrations and descriptions of traditional practices the author forecasts the idea that definitely there are incidents in the plot and character depending on myth and tradition. Even the plot develops and takes turns based on some myths and traditions which are inside and outside the incidents of the plot of the novel. On this whole set of mythical narration and descriptions of tradition further occurrences in the life of Margayya take place. Margayya the person and the character gets mould himself based on this

episode. The developments in the plot and in the life of Margayya are purely influenced by these mythical narrations and traditional attitudes.

On these occasions Narayan is found illustrating the Hindu myths and tradition as a profound author who has understood the psychology and collective unconscious of the individuals and society of his country. He intensely penetrates both into the inner desire of an individual and of the Indian society to explore the human weakness for the myth and tradition. But Narayan never ridicules these conditions of the individual or society whereas he expresses his deep concern towards them by weaving innocence and inevitability of the characters. Similarly the inevitable condition of Margayya in following the tradition and accepting the myths he hears or knows in his life further take place. The plot, even, develops on the basis of his practise of the myths he believes in.

Whatever the mythical pictures and traditional descriptions the author uses, they certainly facilitate to develop the plot. The picture of Margayya's preparation and performance is entirely based on mythical and traditional beliefs. These descriptions have developed the plot and taken it to the level of creating curiosity in the reader. Narayan, at this stage completely depends on the Indian condition to develop the plot and further they are utilised to an extent as part of the plot itself.

When the earlier myths and tradition the author uses are examined it appears that their utility in the construction of the plot is highly necessary. Each myth and tradition Margayya follows are in one or the other way builds up his life as well as the plot of the novel. By each myth Margayya's life is taken to different stage all together. Each tradition he follows makes him to land in different position in this future life. The myths and traditions at one stage are so closely associated with the plot that they seem inseparable and unavoidable in the construction of the events of Margayya's life. Accordingly it happens so that without coming across the myths and traditions Margayya would not have got a turn in his life. It does not mean that myths have turned his life but his strong belief and practice made him to step into new venture in his life. Therefore Narayan in constituting the plot of the novel considers on the available and existing myths and traditions as inevitable. To conclude, as M. Thirumeni in an article on Narayan "Myths of Malgudi" say's "Myths . . . are created to teach a moral to community, . . . or to give unity to that community" (P 28) The myths and traditions of India utilised are par with the other elements of the plot of *The Financial Expert* which are undeniably employed to bring in a greater unity in the structure of the plot.

Notes and References

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