

Myth and History in R. K. Narayan's Fiction

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan is a famous Indian writer in English, his simplicity and enthusiasm for projecting the national psyche won him great fame as a fictional writer. Many renowned critics find that there is a connection between myth and reality with regard to the fictional writings of Indian writers. Mythic and legendary characters are found in the writings of Indian novelists and short story-writers. Some writers mix both myth and history, here the writers use history to achieve their goals of arranging events and characters, modes of presentation and narrative strategies. This paper attempts to indicate to the reading people that R.K. Narayan is a creative writer with an enthusiasm to blend myth and reality in such a way that one might find the blending interesting and informative.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, myth, history, fiction, post-independence, postmodernism.

With regard to "Myth," we should note that the word "Myth" is derived from the Greek word "mythos," which has a range of meanings from "word," through "saying" and "story," to "fiction." Myths narrate fantastic events with no attempt at proof; it is sometimes assumed that they are falsehood. Several literary works are built around mythic narratives. For Indians, like R.K. Narayan, the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are very significant and important. Myth and history are used to present their characters and narratives. Thus generally, the writers not only make their stories much interesting, but cherish the cultural ethos of their native soil. The representation of politics, political figures and events in literature is an aesthetic representation of facts in fiction. R.K. Narayan is an expert in bringing mythological characters

in his historical themes. On the whole, his narrations give entertainment and psychological satisfaction to his readers. Thus, R.K. Narayan stood in front line of Indian English-writers.

Long before independence mythologies and histories employed in the fictional writings influenced the later writers, especially writers who came after independence (1947 A.D and afterwards).

According to Stephen Alter, the idea of myth and history in Indian independence, gained its significance, in the 1950s. After 1947, the writers of fiction began to investigate myths and they also began to receive history. History was also brought back for questioning the glorious past of the country (which was narrated in the myths of the nation). Thus, there was a shift from the traditional narration into the modern and then slowly into the postmodern modes of fiction. The result is: the use of myth took new shapes and acquired new functions in the realist political history. Naturally, R.K. Narayan has adopted the same changing modes of story-telling. Literature became a narrative of people's desire for change and alteration towards a better future of life. Old order of traditional views of history, and a variety of culture and multiplicity of attitudes began to develop through these fictions and people are invited to re-think history and re-examine the established myths.

The post-independence fiction worked on the cultural and post colonial entity as well as the affairs of independent India. Patriarchal family-setup and the people were encouraged to oppose political suppression. The writers, including R.K. Narayan became supporters of 'freedom of thoughts.' The writers also connected myth and history in order to present the realistic context for their narration and mediated various tools such as fantasy, memory, irony and pun. The postcolonial writers came to reconsider the position of the ordinary man and his desires.

R.K. Narayan is also one among them. Traditional historical novels differ from modern historical novel with regard to temporality and spatiality. Modern technique deals with history, not as a confined subject of time and place, but as a form of timeless and imagined space. In post-independence era historical novel is represented with touches of imagination. The writers analyze, the character's psychological and emotional reactions to a specific event. The relationship between fiction and history is an issue of debate among writers and critics. Traditionally the historical novel was concerned with the actual historical events. In modern historical novels there is an examination of cause and effect, and the writers put much emphasis on the individual subject.

The relationship between fiction and history is basically determined by the function of language as a tool of perception and expression. Some writers argue that the value of the historical novel is its presentation of history as pure factual information. In short, there are two levels of historical fiction: realist fiction and fiction as fantasy. The realist fiction is concerned

chiefly with the realist idea of history, whereas the modern historical novel deals with the fantastic representation of history. Postmodern approach encourages the reader to search for the truth, reading the fictional art. The shift from the traditional historical novel to the new postmodern historical fiction in English was actually a shift from the religious and rationalistic approach to the secular and individual approach. In short, there are three main conditions for the postmodern fiction in representing reality: myth, secular interpretation and personal experience.

Postmodernism holds that there are several versions of the historical truths. There is no one certain truth. The writers believe that various social and political factors shape history. Thus, fantasy was recognized to use it instead of scientific facts. In this way the postcolonial and modern fictions are an expression of meta-historical form. They are not tied to the scientific procedures of history. Myth of superiority and official image of history have been challenged. In his essay entitled “True stories and Facts in Fiction,” A.S. Byatt argues, “A good fiction is that which describes the serious social concerns of contemporary society” (True Stories and Facts in fiction 92). Postmodern fiction provides a mythical version of reality.

The postmodern fiction is of political nature. So, the postcolonial innovation is celebrated in India as well as in the third world countries. Postcolonial writers give much importance to the individual rather than a society. They convey India’s reality to the western viewers.

Postmodern writers have mastery of the English language. Even then, they represent the spirit of their social situations and messages. Maggie Ann Bowers says that Magical realism is a technique that “becomes associated with the modernist techniques of the disruption of linear narrative time and the questioning of the nation of history” (Origins of Magical Realism 9).

During colonial era, writers from eastern countries had to submit before the colonial masters without questioning. Later and especially in the post colonial times, the fiction writers adopted techniques like magic reality to differ from the colonial masters and to express the greatness of their own countries [colonized countries]. R.K. Narayan was deeply aware of his Indian identity. His grandmother brought him up. He heard the tales from Indian mythology and epics, just like the other children of India. R.K. Narayan says that he himself was hearing these stories:

I had to recite the tables up to twelve everyday and then all the thirty letters of Tamil alphabet, followed by Avvaiyar’s [an ancient Tamil Poetess] sayings. She also made me repeat a few Sanskrit slokas praising Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning. And then she softly rendered a few classical melodies, whose Raga were to be quickly identified by me. (*My Days A Memoir* 10-11)

R.K. Narayan supports Hindu ideals and beliefs. S.R. Ramtech observes, “R.K.Narayan is the product of South Indian conservative Brahmin family of Madras... the Hindu myths have

gripped Narayan's mind so much that he naturally takes them up for themes in his novels" (*New Insights into the Novels of R. K. Narayan* 21). The use of myth is sporadic to explain a point of view or to support Narayan's views. It was introduced in the same way as most Indians do in their everyday conversations as a way to explain our values and thoughts. For example, in a way R.K. Narayan's love for the wisdom and time tested principles of the Indian Philosophical works like the Puranas, *Ramayana*, *Mahabarata* and the *Bhagwat Gita* or fables, is nothing unique because Indo-Anglian writers were striving to express their feelings, to suit and satisfy an average Indian. He had rendered the simple translation of *The Ramayana and The Mahabharata* in his collection *Gods, Demons and Others*. This shows his knowledge of the myths and folklores. Through these kinds of writings, many of his Indian readers began to understand our ancient culture and way of life, and thus, they get relief from the realities of our increasingly modern, materialistic and industrial society. The clash of the sura and asura, the clash of good versus evil with the triumph of the former, can be shown as R.K. Narayan's inclination towards myths, rituals and folklore.

Writers like Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan were trying to establish an Indian flavor. Myths were used to show how an average Indian thinks. The rich source of unique material found in our epics, myths and lores enriched the narrative. This gave an identity to Indian writers who wrote in English but whose mother tongue was not English. R.K. Narayan's humour tinged with ironic outlook was a way to bring closer the realistic present with the by-gone era.

Indian philosophy found in our *Upanishads* and *The Bhagawat Gita*, is upheld by all Indians. Besides this Indian philosophy, R.K. Narayan was inspired by the exemplary life of Mahatama Gandhi, who did not have to renounce his family and society to achieve the meaning in life, one who was not afraid to admit his faults and who was ready to forgive people and transform them not by lectures alone but by practicing what he preached.

R.K. Narayan had made a difference between Indian philosophy and superstitions. While he appreciated the philosophy as preached by the Vedas and Puranas, he looked upon superstitions as irrational beliefs. He exposed the hypocrisy of such irrational beliefs and strongly advocated against such people and characters who indulge in superstitious behavior. Narayan, in his personal life, had neglected the warning given by an astrologer. In this way, Narayan liked Indian philosophy, but he disliked irrational beliefs and superstitions.

Myth and history are mixed in the short stories of R.K. Narayan. These myths and some historical events helped him much to enhance his narrations. R.K. Narayan skillfully narrated all these different subjects in his short stories. The theme moves through different languages and speech types. In "Naga," for example, the narration attempts to convince the readers or auditors about the authenticity of the events, characters, crises, etc. Friedrich Engels defined "realism" as "typical characters in typical situations" (R.K. Narayan: Critical Essays 55).

Narratology may also be termed as the science of narrative structures, without excluding certain events of historiography. R.K. Narayan's short stories range between the highly imaginative tale and the photographic sketch. The modern short story is a fusion of sketch and tale.

R.K. Narayan's basic narrative technique is combining the scenes of modern life with the exploits and achievements of gods, demons, and heroes ironically. In "Naga" the story presents the effective use of Narayan's techniques of narration with a mixture of myths and history.

In "Naga," a young boy faces two crises. When he began his story, already he had lived through the first crises of being abandoned by his father. He was forced to face life on his own. He realized that he had sufficient knowledge to carry on the family trade of snake charming, performing with the cobra his father had left behind. The story begins at a point close to the second crises. Naga [a cobra] becomes old and tired and a great burden as the boy tries unsuccessfully to rid himself of his dependence, by setting him [The cobra] free. The Naga could not survive on its own. Several questions are left without proper answers: why did the father leave the snake and why did not the monkey? Omission plays an essential role because it created a complete narrative within a small place.

In modern times, short story was developed as a historical genre. Realism and the modern short story embraced a narrative strategy of employing sentimentalism. This is relevant in the context of R.K. Narayan's short stories like "Dasi the Bridegroom." Narayan once wrote:

Society presses upon one all the time. The progress of the last half century may be described as the progress of the Frog out of his well. All means of communication, all methods of speedy travel, all newspapers, broadcasts and every kind of invention is calculated to keep up a barrage of attack on the Frog in the Well. (*R. K. Narayan: Critical Essays 112*)

Narayan generally relied on history, mythology and recent historical facts in his fiction. For example, Mahatama Gandhi stirred agitations for freedom of India. People in many parts of India were moved. Like other parts, at Malgudi area also agitations began in a small manner so Mahatama Gandhi could not be fully successful. Malgudi remains unperturbed, but R.K. Narayan in spite of these historical events ingeniously focuses on the admirable side of human life. Another recent historical development in the social life is that young generation of middle class attempted to gain different kinds of independence. This was a typical feature of modern civilization, R.K. Narayan felt. Accordingly, he presented such matters as agreeable matters for new generations. In this way R.K. Narayan brought myths, history and recent historical developments in his fiction and presented all these things in an interesting manner in his writings. So, his readers used to enjoy his writings. This is the reason for the wide acclamation of his short stories both on and off his native country.

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