

Myths as Narrative of Reality in R. K. Narayan's *The Financial Expert*

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Abstract – Myths play a momentous role in human culture and civilization. As myths are the narratives through which humankind depict issues related to origin, creation, life, death, history, religion, social and economic traditions and culture, therefore, it is an inseparable part of human race. R. K. Narayan is a true painter of Indian life. His realistic approach makes his work have a universal appeal, touching the inner chord of the entire humankind. He uses myths in his work not as narratives of past but as the foundation of morality, virtue, righteousness in human life that brings it more close to reality. The paper “Myths as Narrative of reality in R. K. Narayan’s *The Financial Expert*” explores the work of Narayan in the light of his application of myths.

Key Words – Myth, Reality, Moral and Social values, Culture, Religion, Good and Evil, Renunciation, Hinduism, Virtue, Righteous, Puja, Beliefs, Daily Ritual

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Myths are the primitive tales and yet they are part of the present consciousness of people as they make the “collective unconscious” of a community. So representing myths in one’s works or trying to bring a mythical structure in one’s narrative design is to bring traditions into play to represent the modernist sensibilities as being done by R. K. Narayan in his works. This short paper seeks to explore the novel, *The Financial Expert*, to critically explore the representation of myths as a narrative of reality.

R. K. Narayan is regarded as the harbinger of a new age in Indian-Anglican fiction. He is one of the big trios of Indian literature, other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao who give new dimension to myth and fiction in their writings. Narayan’s realistic approach takes fiction far from nationalistic, romantic and imitative narrative and shapes it close to socio-cultural life of humankind. Narayan was born in Chennai in a Brahmin family in 1906. He was brought up by her grandmother who had deep faith in religion and morality; and the same she taught to Narayan. His grandmother was the source of his knowledge and understanding of myths which later become themes of all his major works. Though, success did not come to him easily, the early years of his life was a tale of struggles and failures. After completing his school education, Narayan took four years to complete his graduation. Later, on his father’s suggestion, Narayan started teaching in a school though he found it tedious.

Soon he realised that his heart was in writing and it heralded his writing career. Even this journey did not

have a smooth beginning. In the beginning of his career, he wrote occasional stories for local magazines and newspapers which did not bring him fame or money. In 1930, he wrote his first novel, *Swami and Friends*. This is the work that brought the creative genius of Narayan to his readers with the creation of his fictional town ‘Malgudi’. The fictional town is the miniature Indian society. The novel was rejected by numerous publishers. In 1935 the novel was published with the help of his friend Kittu and the great literary genius Graham Greene. It was the beginning of his long writing career. After this, Narayan left no stone unturned. He published fourteen novels, one memoir, two hundred short stories, plays and essays. In 1958, *The Guide* brought him the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. His great contribution in Indian English writing brought him many honours including Padma Bhushan in 1964. Universities of Leeds and Delhi conferred on him the honour of D.Litt. He became visiting lecturer in many reputed universities in India, America, Kanas, California, Yale and others.

The novel *The Financial Expert* was listed as Narayan’s one of the most original works of 1951. Generally, myths are defined as symbolic narrative of past usually of unknown origin and about gods and legends and men of courage. Myths are believed to be ostensible in nature and purely fictional and rigid. But Narayan’s psychoanalytical approach explains myth as something dynamic and living reality. In the novel *The Financial Expert*, Narayan made the substantial use of myths and

illustrated them not as an old, rigid and orthodox beliefs but as the foundation of virtue, righteousness, aim and action of human life. Here myth is not just confined to religion but covers each and every aspect of human life such as tradition, culture, daily rituals to all other important events of life (birth, marriage, death), social values, from a tale of past to the foundation of our future. This novel is an illustration how human beings knowingly or unknowingly live by myths and the way they revive myths from one generation to the next. Narayan with his psychoanalytical approach explains myth as a parable. He explains myth as universal feature of social and religious significance. It is simultaneously a discourse of identity of these groups. Narayan says, "The impact of life, the material and substance of our thoughts are the same everywhere, in any state, traditionally India in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The values remain the same in every village, town or city."

The novel suggests that the success and happiness in human life lie in the acceptance of the teachings of mythology (*Shashtras* and *Puranas*) and traditional and cultural values. His creative art fused the extraordinary elements in ordinary characters such as Margayya and Dr Pal and setting or vice versa. With his realistic approach, Narayan successfully illustrated the myth as a living reality and as an inseparable part of humankind. In the novel myths are on the pathway to reality which carry the answers of many unsolved riddles of human life such as purpose of human life, its aim and pathways. The theme, characters and settings are close to reality that is why his work is free from the metaphysical inclination of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. The main function of myth in the novel *The Financial Expert* is not to preach the teachings of Puranas and impress ordinary people by telling adventurous tales of supernatural characters but to preserve human values especially in the Indian context. The novel illustrates how influenced by ego, pride, modernism and vices, governed by karma, fate and chance, human lives go through ups and downs, rise and fall, and at last come to the same state from which it starts; but in the process leads to man's self-realization and renunciation.

In the novel *The Financial Expert* Narayan's fictional town, Malgudi, gives the sense of reality with its location and the life. The fictional town does not have its setting somewhere in unreal or imaginary world such as heaven or hell, but is situated somewhere in Tamil Nadu, India. The creation of the town does not have any mythical foundation but it was founded in 1800s by a fictional but an ordinary character Sir Fredrick Lawley, British officer, who established the town by combing several neighbouring villages under one municipal government. Like many other South Indian towns, Malgudi is a place which is full of modern facilities such as it has a railway station, university, Albert Mission School, Board High school, printing presses (one of them owned by Mr. Madan Lal), Land Mortgage Co-operative Bank along with

other government and private banks, a club and motor cars, tourists' home set up by Dr Lal. There is also an old temple, sacred river *Sarayu* and sacred banyan tree, Vinayak Mudali Street, V.N. Store, regal hair cut salon, etc. The town Malgudi is a prominent example of Narayan's creative thinking that brings fiction close to reality. In an interview to All India Radio, Narayan himself explains: "...his Malgudi is a small temple town situated on the bank of a holy river, like Nanjangud. It is also a university town, like Mysore" (quoted by N. S. Ramchandrish).

It is not only setting of the town but the life in it is also quite similar to a real town. "He moved to the side of the road, as cyclists rang their bells and dodged him; *jutka* men shouted at him, and pedestrians collided against him...two students emerged laughing and talking from the Bombay Anand Bhavan, their lips red with betel leaves ... somebody driving by in a car of the latest model" (30). Also, Malgudi's railway station too has its routine work. A jiggery godown full of flies, muck-stuffed gutters, a number of mills have been opened indicating the industrial development of the town, a sari manufacturing cottage handloom factory. All these make its setting more real. The town in the novel typifies the typical real life, setting, and situations that suffuse the fictional town with reality.

Narayan, being an Indian to the core of his heart, looks at things only through an Indian's eye. The major theme of his work is human relationship and society, and the relationship between the two. Narayan upholds the old traditional and cultural values of life carried on by Indian mythology, *Puranas* and *shashtras*. For the novel *The Financial Expert*, Narayan chose the theme from ancient mythical theory of *Artha-Karma-Dharma* and juxtaposed them in the present time with the facets of modern life. He used the Hindu philosophy of *Purushashtra* as structural parallel where a mythical situation underlines the whole novel. Myth is employed as a 'self-conscious device' in the novel. The author's chief principle of introducing myth and philosophy is to showcase an inevitable triumph of good over evil which exist in the society since the ancient times. Narayan used tradition in the form of belief, a story, an incident, a practice, rites or customs either consciously or unconsciously in the novel whether it is Margayya's meeting with the priest to get the solution of his financial crisis or worshipping Goddess Lakshmi. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, "The Indian people are still closer to their mythology than the modern Irish or British are to the Celtic folklore of Greek legends" (131).

The narration of mythical character Markandya is also an example of influence of mythical practices in the Indian societies. The plot of the novel moves in a mythical pattern of order-disorder-order with the rise and fall of the protagonist Margayya. In picturing this rise and fall, the author employs various techniques and devices with intelligently chosen incidents, facts,

practices and beliefs associated with Indian life. The author succeeds in maintaining the integrity of the structure. He, though not relying completely on these, intelligently and timely utilises them to develop the plot and to bring his proposed meaning to the novel. William Walsh comments, "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" (34).

The relevance of the Hindu philosophy to modern life is apparent to a greater or lesser extent in the novel. There are both realistic and fantastic elements in the novel and both the elements are successfully fused to form a coherent and cohesive whole. Brunton states, "Mr. Narayan is a brilliant subtle comedian. His typical art is an original compounded of fantasy and realism. But when, as sometimes happens in the vein of fantasy predominates, his writing slip into escapism and triviality."

In the novel *The Financial Expert*, the characters too are true representative of contemporary Indian society. Though, the novel deals into mythical theme *Artha-Kama*, but the characters in it are not mythical figures, legends or extra ordinary human beings. They are ordinary human beings with their ordinary qualities and aspirations. They are purely human in their habits. These characters are true representative of a considerable section of Indian society and daily life in it. The author portrays his characters and their feelings, philosophies, actions for an exploration of hidden human conflicts. They preserve basic qualities of individuality despite their allegorical and representative characterization. In Narayan's novels, some odd and enigmatic characters frequently appear. This technique of narration is very Indian as noted in his novels. The protagonist Margayya illustrate the theory of *artha* in the novel, but is not a super human being, just an ordinary character. His shrewd and hardworking character takes him to the height of wealth. By tracing the rise and fall of Margayya, the novelist questioned the ethical and moral codes of living. He is quite suitable for being a tragic hero. The other leading character Dr Pal illustrates the theory of *kama*. He is a complicated character as in the beginning, he selflessly helps the Margayya in reaching heights of success but in the end, he too becomes cause of Margayya's undoing. He arranges the false horoscope that suits to the needs of Margayya. He composes the illicit book *Bed life*. He gives the book to Margayya that brings fortune to him. But he also spoils Margayya's only son Balu. The actions of Dr Pal are results of some sort of foul play. Here Narayan plays the role of modern Vyasa and Valmiki to illustrate the significance of philosophy of life, the role of righteousness and virtue in human life; but his application of the theory comes out with ordinary human beings. It gives new dimension to myth and brings it more close to reality. Narayan's art of characterization turns inward where exploration of the interior self becomes much more important to him.

He represents the modern wizard and modern demon in the novel. The characters are all ordinary human beings representing the great philosophy of Hinduism and reviving and narrating myth in a new form.

Narayan said to Graham Greene in a B.B.C. interview, "I was never aware that I was using a different, foreign language when I wrote in English, because it came to me very easily. I can't explain how English is a very adaptable language. And it's so transparent it can take the tint of any country." Narayan is a purely Indian, but he has an exceptional command over English and yet cannot remain free from the essence of Indianness whether using English language as medium of his writing or in the representation of Indian civilizational ethos as he does through the use of myths. He used the language as the medium of storytelling in a simple, natural, lucid and unaffected manner. His works never turned to be translation. He never compromises with the plot and the theme for the sake of language. It is free from English colloquialisms which in the circumstances would ring false. In fact, Narayan's language belongs to ordinary middle-class people of Indian society. It is the language in which the average Malgudians feel their emotions, laughter and pain, dream, thoughts.

"I just came to see if the secretary's car had come"

"Has your secretary a car?" Margayya asked patronizingly. "Haven't you notice that big red one?"

"Tell your secretary" he checked himself, not being sure what his tongue might utter. (38)

Narayan's English is free from mannerism of its society. His writing style gives the impression of life of Indian middle-class people. The dialogues express the ideas, thoughts emotions in their contemporary manner. To give a pure essence of Indianism he freely use the words of Sanskrit, Hindi and Malayalam, such as 'nibble raw onion', 'dhoti', 'ghee', 'puja', 'karma', 'sowbhagyavathi', 'chiranjeevi', 'mantra', 'shashtra', 'jutka'. The very tone of his narration gives rise to humour. His narrative strategy is simple and traditional. P.S. Ramana writes, "His narrators do not display any great variety. In terms of the implied values and attitudes, the narrator is always reliable and bears a very strong imprint of the author. He tends to focus on the comic and irony only." (125)

"It bothered Margayya so much that he let out a cry: "Aiyo! Aiyo!" (52)

Narayan is a born story teller. He never focuses on complex socio-economic issues. For him, a story or content is more important than the form. He narrates the story both at the superficial level where the locale is dominating, and at the deeper level where general truths are incorporated in artistic terms. "It was about half an hour before the dawn. All this commotion awakened Margayya himself. He cried:

who is there? Who is there?" "Someone was moving about." "Someone made a noise." "The uproar increased. "Where are the matches?" Margayya demanded suddenly, and cursed in the dark ... he sprang up and ran towards the backyard thinking that the intruder must have run in that direction. (52)

Narayan is not a social reformer but a keen observer of Indian society. He writes for the sake of art. His main intention is to paint human life. He is aware that human life has its roots in traditions and culture, though he never illustrates myths as old rigid system of society but explains them as foundation, path and aim of life. Myths, in his works, are not merely illustrative of abstract ideologies but are part of the final vision of reality, a means of reinforcement and enhancement of appeal. He writes not to preach any moral or to plead but explains myths as an inseparable art of human life. In his writing myths do not obscure the real life; rather the myth-motif lends an aura of timelessness and perpetuity. This put his writing in line of the most realistic works, as he mentions in his work *My Dateless Diary* - "Don't forget i am only a fictional writer and not a historian, philosopher or social scientist. My habit is to take things as they are. Too much analysis proves a handicap to my understanding."

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