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Demystifying Myth and Religion in R. K. Narayan's Fictions: A Study

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Abstract – R. K. Narayan is a name that requires no introduction in English Literature. In the cosmos of Indian fiction authors who published in English, it seems like a glittering light. He spent more than 60 years as a novelist. He has received many distinctions and prizes, among them the AC Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature and the second highest civil award of India, Padma Vibhushan. Narayan was also nominated for the Indian Parliament's upper house of Rajya Sabha. He is well known for his plain and unpretentious style of prose, frequently contrasted with William Faulkner. Much of his works reflect a profound curiosity in Hindu faith and myth. In this research article, a humble attempt has been made to analyze the way how Narayan accepts the Hindu Religion and Myth in the lives of his protagonists. He does not change or modernise myths but reveals their timeless significance as the most immediate aspect of human existence by their conceptual representation.

Key Words: Myths, Legends, Religion, Astrologers, Devdasis, Trinity, Vishnu, Maheswar, Brahma, spirits, Manusmriti, Gods, Demons, The Brahmins, The Kshatriyas, The Vaishyas, The Shudras.

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Ved Mehta, R. K. Narayan revealed to him the failure to write novels without Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, astrologers, experts and Devdas or temple prostitutes, and he clarified his opinion by adding in a modest way it was in either case, my India.¹ Randomly, he picked the Hindu myths and legends that are typically woven throughout his novels. In reality, he owes so much the Hindu faith that his novels represent. It is the Hindu way of life that has largely moulded Narayan to the core of his heart. As a result the use of myth appears almost everywhere in the novels of R. K. Narayan. The sum and substance of the Hindu religion lies in the theory that God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscience. If one surrenders unto Him, He takes care of him/her and resolves the problems. He just takes care of and saves the individual if he or she depends on him unconditionally. A. R. Kulkarni observes: "The truth is that when a man depends upon God to overcome the issues, he flows two evils..... Firstly, he is still relying upon God and he is unable to take some initiative himself. There is no place for autonomy. Trust in God and faith in one another go against one another. Secondly, this conviction contributes to idleness and inactivity."² This is why the vast majority of Narayan's characters rely on God. Any occurrence on earth is pre-ordered to most characters of Narayan. Much of their lives they stay prisoner of conditions. They are either irritated with themselves or by the people

around them. Swami (Swami and Friends), Chandran (The Bachelor of Arts), Sampath (Mr. Sampath), Margayya (The Financial Expert), Jagan (The Vendor of Sweets), Raju, The Guide, Shrinivas of The Man Eater of Malgudi and Savitri of The Dark Room are all utterly helpless creatures in the hands of fate. To highlight this point, we take the Dark Room illustration of Savitri. She runs away from home to oppose an immoral love affair between her husband and a trainee officer serving for him. Yet she still ends up admitting loss. The futility, the frustration and her own inescapable weakness made her cry and sob. "A wretched fate that wouldn't let me drown the first time.....this is defeat. I accept it, I am no good for this fight."³ The most important dogma of the Hindu faith is that God resides as an Absolute OM. There is one Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar (Shiva). Many religious manifestations are classified as gods and goddesses. Soul is eternal and eventually fuses with Heaven, the Holy Spirit. This is apparent in the second half of The English Teacher where the death of his wife fills the hero Krishna, and the English Teacher insists that death is not the end of all life. With this conviction in mind, maybe Krishna undertakes psychic communication with his wife's spirit on his wife's passing. He hopes to be together eventually with Susila. "Our faces were lapped with cold air. The bounds of our identities shattered abruptly. This was a special and unchanging feeling of joy, a moment where one felt thankful to Life and Death." That's how the author went around as he

missed his beloved wife too. Narayan writes: "This view is maybe unscientific, but it has been enabling me to endure my wife's death..... After her passing, I could somehow survive....." 4 Hindu epics Ramayan and Mahabharat, which shape the foundation of the Hindu faith, show that their husband is all for the lady. He's God's counterpart for her. The woman's complete surrender and loyalty to the husband is the best way to maintain harmony. This is the woman's only faith to practice. She is required to follow her spouse and preserve marital faithfulness even though the husband is cruel and debaucher. She has no right in the land of the household. For starters, Savitri in *The Dark Room* has no rights whatsoever in her own home. And then she places insult and maltreatment on her husband's side. But as she considers anything unbearable, she leaves her home to reaffirm her independence. Yet she doesn't have the confidence to meet life's obstacles. She winds up embracing complete loss. Janamma also feels that utter obedience to the husband contributes to harmony, another character in the book. Manu and later moralists dictate that a woman has no right is so intricately rooted in the minds of all that Ramani could say Savitri bluntly that she has no right whatsoever. She repents absolutely helplessly: "In the land of Yama the cauldron should be ready for me for sin to speak back to a man and disobey him, so what should I do? "Even in modern times Ramani mentions the ancient epics and scriptures that warn women to be the most purely identical with their spouses. Also, Rosie, highly trained and leaves her husband for her dreams, wishes to die at the door of her husband. How pathetic her words are: "he may not admit me over the threshold, in which event it is far better to end one's life on his doorstep." 5 Manu, the known Hindu rule giver, splits Hindus into four castes: the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra. Manu prescribes the roles of all the four branches of society in Manusmriti. The Brahmin's task was to read and to instruct, to do yajnas for others and to send and take alms (dons). The Kshatriya was responsible for saving individuals, donating alms, doing yajnas, studying and not participating in sensual pleasures. The Vais can do agriculture and industry, protect livestock, give alms, learn and make money through interest. Just one mission was allocated to the Shudras, which was to represent the above three divisions freely. 6 In the Mahabharat, referring to the Shudras' tasks, Bhishma stated, "The Founder meant the Sudras to become slaves of the other three orders. The Shudras have the responsibility to represent the Other three grades. Through such facilities the three of them would reach great happiness." 7 In the Bhagwad Geeta Lord Krishna, "The fourfold arrangement was designed by Me according to the differing disposition and behavior (through them)." 8 This division was so stiff in the course of time that it had become waterproof compartments. The citizens of one caste thus had no mutual interaction with the people of another caste. At least the citizens of the upper three castes might blend together. But the fourth, comprising Shudras (untouchables), is absolutely alienated from the main stream of life. In his books, Narayan gracefully depicts

this situation of society. The mother of Raju doesn't support Raju's marriage to Rosie because she is a part of the low-caste society. At first, she sympathizes with Rosie, but when she discovers that Rosie is part of the girls' dance class she switches her perspective. "Are you our caste?" she flares up. No, our class? Our class? No No,... After all you are a kid who dances. We're not admitting them into our homes." Jagan is hesitant to take Grace as his birthright. Even Raman's aunt was unwilling to consider the notion of Raman's marriage to a Christian child, Daisy. Narayan doesn't seem to condemn loving marriage when he passed through it himself. But even the love marriage of Narayan may not have materialized if Rajam belonged to another caste. Malgudi takes a festive glance at the town tour of Mahatma Gandhi. Yet Shriram's grandmother remains restless since he lets the Hindu gods touch the untouchable. From the talk Mahatma Gandhi has had with a sweeper who occupies Divan to the sorrow of the Chairman of the Civic Committee, it is evident that he is immensely involved in hearing his father's call. The Mahatma advises him to be neat and tidy no doubt, but he never enquires of him whether he goes to school at all. This shows how the Mahatma looks at the problem. Otherworldliness and quietism is at the root of the Hindu religion. This can be reflected in the mindset of several protagonists. In his books, R.K. Narayan. Frustrated under the pressure of social customs and circumstances, they sometimes run away from the problems of life, other times they become monk and still other times they seek refuge in the philosophy of life. For eg, Krishna finds peace in the world of the spirits in *The English Teacher*. Shrinivas in *Mr. Sampath* and in *Natraj* in *The Man Eater* of Malgudi are sheltered by the theory of moral order, and because nothing is wrong with the earth, it is completely needless for them to do something in the Universe since in the future all the struggles of this life will be paid for. Narayan was a good faithful in the other universe. In spite of the fact that he knew that the general trend of the time to come was to be rational and scientific, he believed in the age-old sacred Hindu shastras. He believed in the immortality of soul firmly. In his book *My Days*, he acknowledged that the psychological interaction in *The English Instructor* was based on his own psychological experiment with his dead wife's spirit. In addition, his novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* is exclusively dedicated to the Hindu ideology that provided the remittance that he and the tiger were once brothers in their former existence. Hindu religion and myth go along. Myth is a symbolic narrative medium transmitted through both oral and written narrative medium. It apparently relates actual events and characters of quasi-historical origins and is associated with human belief system. In Oxford's dictionary and thesaurus, the concept of myth is a typical tale typically featuring characters that are magical or mythical who embody common views on natural or social phenomena. These myths are often collectively referred to as story. Myths are unique stories of gods or superhuman entities that are interested in unusual situations or incidents. In certain instances, time is not defined and interpreted as occurring apart from contemporary human experience,

dislocated from history. Myth is distinguished from symbolic behaviour and symbolic places or objects, such as temples, idols, icons etc. In most of his novels, R. K. Narayan refers to the fables and legends of India. In the early episodic novel *Swami and Friends*, it is implicit in Swami's actions and reactions that he believes in the myth that the omnipresent and omniscient God has the power to convert sand into money. He goes on to bury two pebbles in the backyard hoping and praying for divine intervention which would change the pebbles into three pie coins. When his hopes are dashed, he kicks at them in anger and frustration only to repent at his action, fearing the retribution of gods. R. K. Narayan's novel *The English Teacher* is highly supernatural and autobiographical. Krishna in *The English Teacher*, after the loss of his wife, pines for the wife Susila, grief-stricken and desolate. The experiments in psychic communication with Susila, his dead wife with the help of a medium, introduces a whimsical or fantastical element into the story that has so long been very much truthful to life. Automatic writing and psychic communication attempts with the deceased are not rare. Beginning as an interesting account of domestic felicity, it later gets bogged down in the so called spiritual things and philosophic discussions, which have in them, no grain of truth at all. Even the writer's own psychic contacts with the spirit of his dead wife that has occasioned the novel, is but a hallucination on his part. The profound realization that dawns upon the protagonist, the end as the unmitigated loneliness, is the only truth of life that makes him survive the death of his beloved wife. Narayan's recording in his memoir *My Days* of the event of his wife's death deserves attention here: "More than any other book, *The English Teacher* is autobiographical in content, very little part of it being fiction. The English novel teacher, Krishna is a fictitious character in Malgudi's fictional area, but he passes the same experience I have encountered and calls his wife Susila. The payment that typhoid took and all the resulting desolation, and the psychological changes that were made by a boy, were focused on my own experience⁹. Death is not a complete stop for R. K. Narayan. As it says in *The English Instructor*, each hiatus contributes to a new identity which replaces the previous identity. It is more like a comma. Yet Narayan's oriental ideology is contrary to the western idea of personality as a shell. His protagonists play not just a part, but live one life which is not a performance but a true fact. As a spectator analysis once said, his strengths lay in the portrayal of the "extraordinary ordinarily" of daily existence. Narayan is full of Hindu ideology and although he denies much of his notions, he assimilates the universal truths. As he states in *The English Teacher*: I am purely acquainted with the history, current and potential in this life. Beyond that I have nothing to say, because I believe I shall once again be resolved into the five elements of which I am composed: and my intelligence and memory may not be more than what we see in air and water! Those who try to find existentialism, nihilism, Magic realism and all sorts of "ism" would be disappointed in Narayan's works, because Western

ideas have nothing to do with his perception of existence. As an in-depth reading reveals, Narayan is steeped in Hindu ideology and although he discards much of his theories, he assimilates the universal truths. Narayan does not seem to accept the Karma hypothesis but does not support the Epicurean 'carpe diem' or 'seize the day' theory at the same stage. Our acts in this life can only have implications in this life, and knowledge will emerge from the realization of our follies and illusions. He believes in keeping our faculties and perceptions valuable in this world instead of collecting over a lifetime. The opinion of Narayan is that knowledge is not acquired through meditation or mystical thinking, but by encounters which existence has to bring. Raju in *The Guide* has an average upbringing, a peculiar love interest, a parasite life that continues to his time in prison. In plain terms, Narayan depicts in various situations a typical Indian guy. What happens to Raju has something in common with what happens to Savitri in *The Dark Room* when she tries to commit suicide after being driven out by her husband, to the headmaster in *The English Teacher* when he does not die on the day an astrologer predicted that he would, to Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets* when his son Mali violates all his notions of life, and to Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* when he renounces everything and becomes a sanyasi. They all die a death, but this death is not an end but the point of departure into a new existence. 10 As Narayan tells about Chandran, when he can't marry the young girl named Malathi, when he becomes a Sanyasi. Others can give up a spiritual motivation or intent. But the renunciation of Chandran was nothing like that. But with this symbolic demise, a Chandran appears who discovers that he has been 'humbugging through his life' and is returning to the norm, a guy who has been thoroughly transformed. The end of *The Guide* leaves us an unsolved dilemma. Is Raju dying at the end of the novel? No, For the first time, Raju has achieved anything for himself and he renounced his former existence in the moment he completed this selfless mission. Therefore, we see his renaissance, not death, and this is improved by Raju's image as an infant. Like a phoenix, Raju kills the past and recreates himself. Similarly, Savitri may be assumed to have been revived following her unsuccessful suicide attempt. It is almost a new life, but it must go back to its former nature because there are very close ties between her and her married life, in particular in the form of her children. For Raju, the headmaster, and Jagan, life is refreshed, as can be seen in the declaration by Jagan at the end of the novel: 'I am a free man.' Yet becoming a woman makes it difficult for Savitri to achieve this liberty. Narayan shows the hubris of Indian women right over *The Dark Space*. Narayan reflects in his thesis on how unusual encounters alter our view of life. Raju's encountering Rosie and his later term in custody, his failure at the death of his wife Sushila, his perfect clash with his son Mali, Chandran's infatuation with Malathi, and his eventual sanyas all alter their life prospects. Narayan's life is the best teacher. The headmaster of *The English*

Instructor says: 'You should regard me as dead or as anyone who took Sanyasa Ashrama.' In the Sweets vendor Jagan, displaying a resemblance to Raju, says: at some point in one's life one has to step away from the normal world and vanish. These comments further endorse the belief that most of the characters of Narayan pursue inner harmony and communal liberty. In his retirement day Krishna informs us in English Teacher: "Let me inform you that I am retiring, and not with a sensation of sacrificing for national purposes, but for a rather selfish intent. I'm hoping for a deep inner harmony". This freedom, however, does not make them selfish. This is almost the Hinayana form of Buddhism where the salvation of the self is followed by the salvation of others. Raju's penance is for the greater common good, just as are the headmaster's and Krishna's. And the Vendor of Sweets ends with Jagan's statement that he will look after Grace, as is evident in his words, 'It's a duty we owe her.' The characters of Narayan should be studied in terms of the Buddhist idea of Nirvana rather than in the pursuit of threads of existentiality. Nirvana is a condition of total extinction, not life, but emotions and sorrow; it is a state outside the chain of cause (in the Raju case), a state of liberation (Jagan). It is therefore a condition of pleasure (the headmaster). It is the reality of total selflessness and intrinsic, the vacuity of the ego and the impermanence of all. Ignorance is destroyed by understanding this reality, and consequently all terror, pain, and hate is destroyed (Chandran). The English Teacher, Narayan notes his rule of existence: the law of life cannot be prevented. The rule falls into practice as we get detached from the womb of our mother. All the hardships and miseries of life are attributed to our attempts to detain, run free from and damage this statute. Deep unmixed isolation is the only fact in creation. This point of view is complimented by The Seller of Sweets: our attachments blind us. Each connection produces a delusion and it drives us apart. Raju, Chandran, Krishna, and Jagan all try to escape from this law by clinging to various kinds of attachment, be it love for a woman, or for one's son but realization does eventually come to them all. Thus, all religion and myth exhibited in Narayan's novels centers round his own vision of life.

Hindu religion is inseparably associated with Astrology which is so closely associated with Indian Mythology. Astrology is the study of the movements and relative positions of celestial bodies as having an influence on human affairs and the natural world. Not only R. K. Narayan but his protagonists also believe in Astrology. Many of the protagonists in his novels are staunch in his faith in Astrology and thus, in fatalism. They believe that wrong matching of horoscopes of the bride and the bridegroom results in calamity or even death of either of the two. For example, in The Bachelor of arts Chandran's father takes initiative in sending one Mr. Shastrigal to the house of the bride (Malthi) to bring about the settlement. Horoscopes were exchanged. Yet D's father of the bride. W. Krishnan Iyer was so orthodox in his conduct that he absolutely opposed the suggestion and claimed that Chandran's horoscope was unacceptable. "I know myself a bit

about Astrology. In a horoscope, I'm able to forget several items. Typically, I don't care about the factors which display prosperity, income, progeny and so on. I typically forget them. I usually overlook them. But I think we can't neglect the longevity problem. I know hundreds of occasions where Mars' existence in this house (of a horoscope)I can inform you that...." "It destroys the wife, he said, soon after the marriage, when the father of Chandran was under threat."¹¹ D.W. Krishnan holds the same belief when he says in his letter to Chandran's father: "However we can only propose. He on the Trupati Hills alone knows what is best for us." In The Financial Expert, even Margayya who is modern in outlook never spared a dig at the custom of tallying horoscopes as a preliminary to marriage. He seems to believe in Astrology up to some extent though he could not uproot himself from the religious taboos fully. This is in keeping with R. K. Narayan's vision that the law of life cannot be avoided. R. K. Narayan's remarkable popularity lies in his extraordinary gift of storytelling, with the heady mixture of Indian myths and lore. This adds to their appeal. Narayan's creative brilliance is visible in his use of myth as a strategy to present contemporary truth. His Malgudi and its inmates acquire a mythical aura- the village, the Nallappa grove, the Sarayu River, etc. accentuate this. His novels project Indignity through Malgudi's presentation that emerges as rooted in the 3,000 years of Hindu culture.

CONCLUSION:

The gods and demons, an integral part of the Indian tradition, are a constant source of inspiration for him. It is in this sense that R. K. Narayan incorporates mythical incidents and the experiences of gods and demons, making them relevant to the people of Malgudi. Myth cannot be relegated to the world of obscurity since it is not a dead form. R. Narayan does not modify or modernize the myths, but reveals their timeless significance as the most immediate aspect of human existence through their symbolic representation.

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